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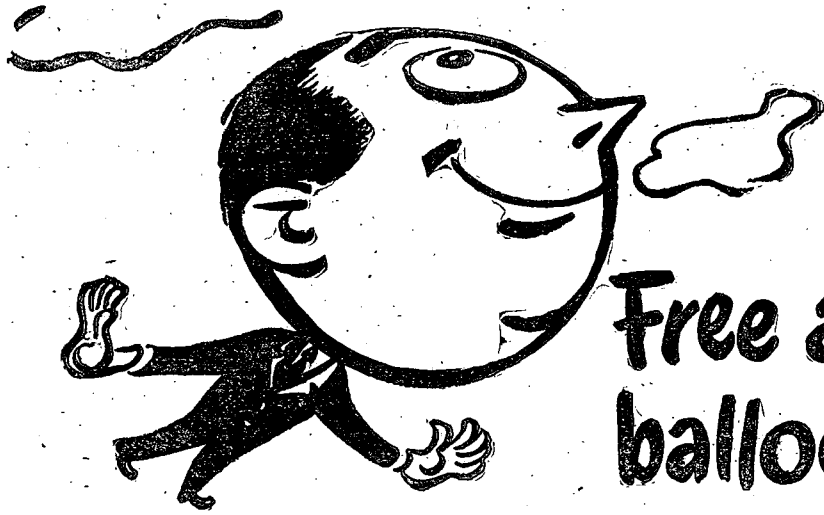

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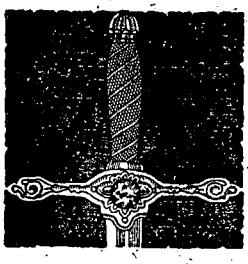

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By LEIGH BRACKETT

Rhiannon seeks release from his age-long prison in the mind of a man from Earth—plunging Matt Carse into the midst of a romantic, deadly past! 9

Two Complete Novelets

THE ALIEN MACHINE ..... Raymond F. Jones 74
Cal Meacham was proud of his scientific talents till he was faced with alien products that could only have come from another culture!

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Jose Pindobal's wife could think of but one way for him to win fame—and his success brought the earth to the brink of disaster!

Five Short Stories

MOUSE ..... Fredric Brown 89
The spaceship from Somewhere carried strange cargo

LIKE A KEEPSAKE ..... John D. MacDonald 95
"If this should be the world's end, it's a real black color. . . ."

SEE YOU LATER ..... Henry Kuttner 116
The Hogbens defy space and time to get Old Yancey Tarbell's debts paid

THE LIFE-WORK OF PROFESSOR MUNTZ ..... Murray Leinster 128
Multiple time-tracks lead to the Ajax Brewery!

THE HOMESTEADER ..... James Blish 135
When moon-based rockets vanish, Kagan proves it's done with mirrors

Features

THE READER SPEAKS ..... The Editor 6

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW ..... A Department 157

THE FRYING PAN ..... A Fanzine Review 160

Also See "Wonder Oddities" on Page 127

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A DEPARTMENT FOR SCIENCE FICTION FANS

RECENTLY, in the editorial for the January issue of our companion magazine, STARTLING STORIES, we had occasion to cite Dr. Malthus and his famed theorem of diminishing returns—to be more explicit, the apparently inevitable starvation of humanity, thanks to uncontrolled increase in population.

We mentioned the good eighteenth-century doctor, not for the sake of his theory alone, but as an example of how the best-laid theories are so frequently set at nought by the doings of man and nature. However, perhaps because of using Malthus as an example, we have found our attention ever since more fully focused on the crucial problem of catering to a world whose population is, for the most part, underfed if not actually starving.

Judging by the stories and articles we have seen on the subject, to say nothing of various radio addresses about it, we are far from alone in our interest. Apparently a great many able and qualified folk have been putting in full time jobs on the matter of getting the world properly fed.

More important, they seem to be getting results.

Water Farming

Just a decade ago we had occasion to tour much of the country while assembling material for an article on hydroponics or water-farming. We got a good look at some pretty remarkable developments—acres of chrysanthemums grown in long ditchlike trays, tomatoes developed to vast size and succulence in pebbles and chemicals under artificial lighting, other fruits and vegetables grown out of doors without aid of dirt.

It was, perhaps, science fiction in actuality—but on the whole it impressed us as being far to complex, fussy and expensive a method for the sort of mass production a hungry world so sorely needs.

Actually only one-sixteenth of the Earth's surface is arable and this minute fraction is decreasing in size with every tick of the clock thanks to careless soil care and the food demands of an ever-increasing population. Hunger, it seems, is destined to be the lot of all mankind unless some new method of raising and distributing cheaply vast quantities of edible nourishment is quickly devised.

Apparently, though no large-scale program of "artificial" food is currently in production, scientists here and abroad are beginning to get a grip on the answers to this most pressing of human problems.

Three New Methods

Hydroponics, as we suspected, is not the answer although many of the principles developed in water and chemical farming are being applied on more simple and advanced methods. Food-sources are being sought and found in three new methods of production well worthy of the attention of everyone interested not only in the feeding of the world but in science fiction.

Oldest of these seems to be the plankton farming scheme—which has, in laboratories at any rate, found a tremendous source of synthetic proteins and carbohydrates in the microscopic life of the sea. Like hydroponics, it works and works well but offers some pretty rugged barriers in the path of widespread development and distribution at low cost.

Jamaica, in the British West Indies, has already turned surplus molasses products to

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Torula yeast, which is currently beginning to make a dent on the mass malnutrition from which the island has suffered since the great days of King Sugar almost a century ago.

This new yeast, developed by British scientist A. C. Thaysen, may be a part of the big answer. Produced from algae—tiny seaweed plants—in vast open water farms, it is practically indestructible, easily processed in quantity and can be employed as a food richener in everything from cereals to sandwich spreads to canned soups. It produces food in almost any desired category without recourse to the hard-used soil of the world.

Carbon 14

Still more interesting to science fiction readers is a brand new by-product of the Atomic Energy Commission experiments in California called Carbon 14. Using somewhat the same basic methods as Dr. Thaysen's Torula yeast, our scientists, also working with algae, have been able with Carbon 14 to turn out masses of carbohydrates, proteins or fats almost at will.

All of these processes are at present full of "bugs" which stand in the path of quantity production and cheap distribution to those millions who need their products the most. And none of them, of course, will replace the steak, roast or mixed grill in the gustatory affection of the so-called average American.

The Hope of Plenty

However, appetizing ways of using them will be found and they offer the entire world population, for the first time since the hasty departure from the Garden of Eden, the hope of plenty of food for health and comfort. The next ten years may well witness the freeing of mankind from the soil.

Furthermore, with the staples of human diet and fodder for cattle produced from the sea, vast areas of land will be available for gardening and pasturage, thus increasing the supplies of meat and garden vegetables which make the dinner table attractive. So the gourmet along with the poorest native should welcome the change.

Let us hope we don't knock ourselves out politically before this first essential of actual

(Continued on page 141)

To People who want to write *but can't get started*

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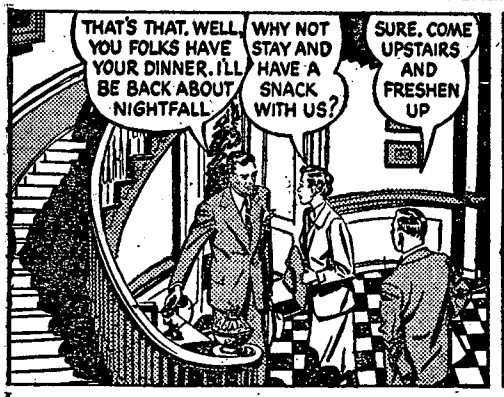
THAT'S THAT. WELL, YOU FOLKS HAVE YOUR DINNER. I'LL BE BACK ABOUT NIGHTFALL.
WHY NOT STAY AND HAVE A SNACK WITH US?
SURE. COME UPSTAIRS AND FRESHEN UP

THIS BLADE SURE MAKES SHORT WORK OF WHISKERS. MY FACE FEELS GREAT!
I'M SOLD ON THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING

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a novel by LEIGH BRACKETT

SEA-KINGS OF MARS

Matt Carse seeks an ancient tomb on the Red Planet—and is swept into a past deadly and romantic!

CHAPTER I

The Door to Infinity

MATT CARSE knew he was being followed almost as soon as he left Madam Kan's. The laughter of the little dark women was still in his ears and the fumes of *thil* lay like a hot sweet haze across his vision—but they did not obscure from him the whisper of sandaled feet close behind him in the chill Martian night.

Carse quietly loosened his proton-gun in its holster but he did not attempt to lose his pursuer. He did not slow nor quicken his pace as he went through Jekkara.

"The Old Town," he thought. "That will be the best place. Too many people about here."

Jekkara was not sleeping despite the late-

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ness of the hour. The Low Canal towns never sleep, for they lie outside the law and time means nothing to them. In Jekkara and Valkis and Barrakesh night is only a darker day.

Carse walked beside the still black waters in their ancient channel, cut in the dead sea-bottom. He watched the dry wind shake the torches that never went out and listened to the broken music of the harps that were never stilled. Lean lithe men and women passed him in the shadowy streets, silent as cats except for the chime and whisper of the tiny bells the women wear, a sound as delicate as rain, distillate of all the sweet wickedness of the world.

They paid no attention to Carse, though despite his Martian dress he was obviously an Earthman and though an Earthman's life is usually less than the light of a snuffed candle along the Low Canals. Carse was one of them. The men of Jekkara and Valkis and Barrakesh, are the aristocracy of thieves and they admire skill and respect knowledge and know a gentleman when they meet one.

That was why Matthew Carse, ex-Fellow of the Interplanetary Society of Archaeologists, ex-assistant to the chair of Martian Antiquities at Kahora, dweller on Mars for thirty of his thirty-five years, had been admitted to their far more exclusive society of thieves and had sworn with them the oath of friendship that may not be broken.

Yet now, through the streets of Jekkara, one of Carse's "friends" was stalking him with all the cunning of a sandcat. He wondered momentarily whether the Earth Police Control might have sent an agent here looking for him and immediately discarded that possibility. Agents of anybody's police did not live in Jekkara. No, it was some Low-Canaller on business of his own.

Carse left the canal, turning his back on the dead sea-bottom and facing what had once been inland. The ground rose sharply to the upper cliffs, much gnawed and worn by time and the eternal wind. The old city brooded there, the ancient stronghold of the Sea Kings of Jekkara, its glory long stripped from it by the dropping of the sea.

The New Town of Jekkara, the living town down by the canal, had been old when Ur of the Chaldees was a raw young village. Old Jekkara, with its docks of stone and marble still standing in the dry and dust-choked harbor, was old beyond any Earth conception of the word. Even Carse, who knew as much about it as any living man, was always awed by it.

He chose now to go this way because it was utterly dead and deserted and a man might be alone to talk to his friend.

The empty houses lay open to the night. Time and the scouring wind had worn away their corners and the angles of their doorways, smoothed them into the blurred and weary land. The little low moons made a tangle of conflicting shadows among them. With no effort at all the tall Earthman in his long dark cloak blended into the shadows and disappeared.

CROUCHED in the shelter of a wall he listened to the footsteps of the man who followed him. They grew louder, quickened, slowed indecisively, then quickened again. They drew abreast, passed and suddenly Carse had moved in a great catlike spring out into the street and a small wiry body was writhing in his grasp, mewing with fright as it shrank from the icy jabbing of the proton-gun in its side.

"No!" it squealed. "Don't! I have no weapon. I mean no harm. I want only to talk to you." Even through the fear a note of cunning crept into the voice. "I have a gift."

Carse assured himself that the man was unarmed and then relaxed his grip. He could see the Martian quite clearly in the moonlight—a ratlike small thief and an unsuccessful one from the worn kilt and harness and the lack of ornaments.

The dregs and sweepings of the Low Canals produced such men as this and they were brothers to the stinging worms that kill furtively out of the dust. Carse did not put his gun away.

"Go ahead," he said. "Talk."

"First," said the Martian, "I am Penkawr of Barrakesh. You may have heard of me." He strutted at the sound of his own name like a shabby bantam rooster.

"No," said Carse. "I haven't."

His tone was like a slap in the face. Penkawr gave a snarling grin.

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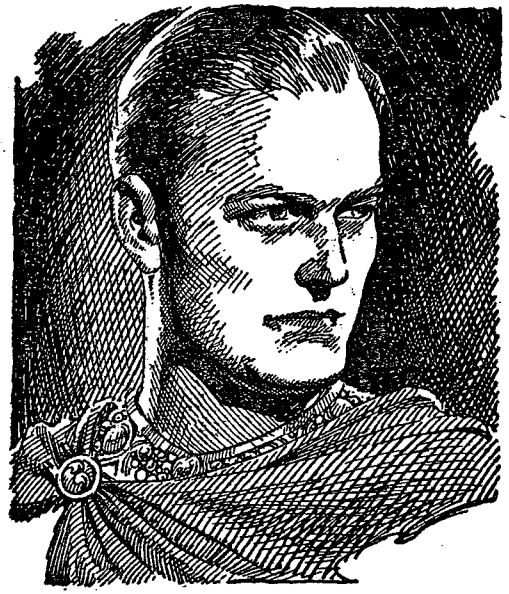
"No matter. I have heard of you, Carse. As I said, I have a gift for you. A most rare and valuable gift."

"Something so rare and valuable that you had to follow me in the darkness to tell me about it, even in Jekkara." Carse frowned at Penkawr, trying to fathom his duplicity. "Well, what is it?"

"Come and I'll show you."

"Where is it?"



MATT CARSE

"Hidden. Well hidden up near the palace quays."

Carse nodded. "Something too rare and valuable to be carried or shown even in a thieves' market. You intrigue me, Penkawr. We will go and look at your gift."

Penkawr showed his pointed teeth in the moonlight and let off. Carse followed. He moved lightly, poised for instant action. His gun hand swung loose and ready at his side. He was wondering what sort of price Penkawr of Barrakesh planned to ask for his "gift."

As they climbed upward toward the palace, scrambling over worn reefs and along cliff-faces that still showed the erosion of the sea, Carse had as always the feeling that he was climbing a sort of ladder into the past. It turned him cold with a queer shivering thrill to see the great docks still standing, marked with the mooring of ships. In the eerie moonlight one could almost imagine . . .

"In here," said Penkawr.

Carse followed him into a dark huddle of crumbling stone. He took a little krypton-lamp from his belt-pouch and touched it to a glow. Penkawr knelt and scrabbled among the broken stones of the floor until he brought forth a long thin bundle wrapped in rags.

With a strange reverence, almost with fear, he began to unwrap it. Carse knelt beside him. He realized that he was holding his breath, watching the Martian's lean dark hands, waiting. Something in the man's attitude had caught him into the same taut mood.

The lamplight struck a spark of deep fire from a half-covered jewel, and then a clean brilliance of metal. Carse leaned forward. Penkawr's eyes, slanted wolf-eyes yellow as topaz, glanced up and caught the Earthman's hard blue gaze, held it for a moment, then shifted away. Swiftly he drew the last covering from the object on the floor.

Carse did not move. The thing lay bright and burning between them and neither man stirred nor seemed even to breathe. The red glow of the lamp painted their faces, lean bone above iron shadows, and the eyes of Matthew Carse were the eyes of a man who looks upon a miracle.

After a long while he reached out and took the thing into his hands. The beautiful and deadly slimness of it, the length and perfect balance, the black hilt and guard that fitted perfectly his large hand, the single smoky jewel that seemed to watch him with a living wisdom, the name etched in most rare and most ancient symbols upon the blade. He spoke, and his voice was no more than a whisper.

"The sword of Rhiannon!"

Penkawr let out his breath in a sharp sigh. "I found it," he said. "*I* found it."

Carse said, "Where?"

"It does not matter where. I found it. It is yours—for a small price."

"A small price." Carse smiled. "A small price for the sword of a god."

"An evil god," muttered Penkawr. "For more than a million years, Mars has called

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him the Cursed One."

"I know," Carse nodded. "Rhiannon, the Cursed One, the Fallen One, the rebel one of the gods of long ago. I know the legend, yes. The legend of how the old gods conquered Rhiannon and thrust him into a hidden tomb."

PENKAWR looked away. He said, "I know nothing of any tomb."

"You lie," Carse told him softly. "You found the Tomb of Rhiannon or you could not have found his sword. You found, somehow, the key to the oldest sacred legend on Mars. The very stones of that place are worth their weight in gold to the right people."

"I found no tomb," Penkawr insisted sullenly. He went on quickly. "But the sword itself is worth a fortune. I daren't try to sell it—these Jekkarans would snatch it away from me like wolves, if they saw it.

"But you can sell it, Carse." The little thief was shivering in the urgency of his greed. "You can smuggle it to Kahora and sell it to some Earthman for a fortune."

"And I will," Carse nodded. "But first we will get the other things in that tomb."

Penkawr had a sweat of agony upon his face. After a long time he whispered, "Leave it at the sword, Carse. That's enough."

It came to Carse that Penkawr's agony was blended of greed and fear. And it was not fear of the Jekkarans but of something else, something that would have to be awesome indeed to daunt the greed of Penkawr.

Carse swore contemptuously. "Are you afraid of the Cursed One? Afraid of a mere legend that time has woven around some old king who's been a ghost for a million years?"

He laughed and made the sword flash in the lamplight. "Don't worry, little one. I'll keep the ghosts away. Think of the money. You can have your own palace with a hundred lovely slaves to keep you happy."

He watched fear struggle again with greed in the Martian's face.

"I saw something there, Carse. Something that scared me, I don't know why."

Greed won out. Penkawr licked dry lips. "But perhaps, as you say, it is all only legend. And there are treasures there—even my half-share of them would make me wealthy beyond dreams."

"Half?" Carse repeated blandly. "You're mistaken, Penkawr. Your share will be one-third."

Penkawr's face distorted with fury, and he leaped up. "But I found the Tomb! It's my discovery!"

Carse shrugged. "If you'd rather not share that way, then keep your secret to yourself. Keep it—till your 'brothers' of Jekkara tear it from you with hot pincers when I tell them what you've found."

"You'd do that?" choked Penkawr. "You'd tell them and get me killed?"

The little thief stared in impotent rage at Carse, standing tall in the lampglow with the sword in his hands, his cloak falling back from his naked shoulders, his collar and belt of jewels looted from a dead king flaring. There was no softness in Carse, no relenting. The deserts and the suns of Mars, the cold and the heat and the hunger of them, had flayed away all but the bone and the iron sinew.

Penkawr shivered. "Very well, Carse. I'll take you there—for one-third share."

Carse nodded and smiled. "I thought you would."

Two hours later, they were riding up into the dark time-worn hills that loomed behind Jekkara and the dead sea-bottom.

It was very late now, an hour that Carse loved because it seemed then that Mars was most perfectly itself. It reminded him of a very old warrior, wrapped in a black cloak and holding a broken sword, dreaming the dreams of age which are so close to reality, remembering the sound of trumpets and the laughter and the strength.

The dust of the ancient hills whispered under the eternal wind. Phobos had set, and the stars were coldly brilliant. The lights of Jekkara and the great black blankness of the dead sea-bottom lay far behind and below them now. Penkawr led the way up ascending gorges, their ungainly mounts picking their way with astonishing agility over the treacherous ground.

"This is how I stumbled on the place," Penkawr said. "On a ledge my beast broke its leg in a hole—and the sand widened the hole as it flowed inward, and there was the tomb, cut right into the rock of the cliff. But the entrance was choked when I found it."

He turned and fixed Carse with a sulky yellow stare. "*I* found it," he repeated. "I still don't see why I should give you the lion's share."

"Because I'm the lion," said Carse cheerfully.

He made passes with the sword, feeling it

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blend with his flexing wrist, watching the starlight slide down the blade. His heart was beating high with excitement and it was the excitement of the archaeologist as well as of the looter.

He knew better than Penkawr the importance of this find. Martian history is so vastly long that it fades back into a dimness from which only vague legends have come down—legends of human and half-human races, of forgotten wars, of vanished gods.

GREATEST of those gods had been the Quiru, hero-gods who were human yet superhuman, who had had all wisdom and power. But there had been a rebel among them—dark Rhiannon, the Cursed One, whose sinful pride had caused some mysterious catastrophe.

The Quiri, said the myths, had for that sin crushed Rhiannon and locked him into a hidden tomb. And for more than a million years men had hunted the Tomb of Rhiannon because they believed it held the secrets of Rhiannon's power.

Carse knew too much archaeology to take old legends too seriously. But he did believe that there was an incredibly ancient tomb that had engendered all these myths. And as the oldest relic on Mars it and the things in it would make Matthew Carse the richest man on three worlds—if he lived.

"This way," said Penkawr abruptly. He had ridden in silence for a long time, brooding.

They were far up in the highest hills behind Jekkara. Carse followed the little thief along a narrow ledge on the face of a steep cliff.

Penkawr dismounted and rolled aside a large stone, disclosing a hole in the cliff that was big enough for a man to wriggle through.

"You first," said Carse. "Take the lamp."

Reluctantly Penkawr obeyed, and Carse followed him into the foxhole.

At first there was only an utter darkness beyond the glow of the krypton-lamp. Penkawr slunk, cringing now like a frightened jackal.

Carse snatched the lamp away from him and held it high. They had scrambled through the narrow foxhole into a corridor that led straight back into the cliff. It was square and without ornament, the stone beautifully polished. He started off along it, Penkawr following.

The corridor ended in a vast chamber. It too was square and magnificently plain from what Carse could see of it. There was a dais at one end with an altar of marble, upon which was carved the same symbol that appeared on the hilt of the sword—the *ouroboros* in the shape of a winged serpent. But the circle was broken, the head of the serpent lifted as though looking into some new infinity.

Penkawr's voice came in a reedy whisper from behind his shoulder. "It was here that I found the sword. There are other things around the room but I did not touch them."

Carse had already glimpsed objects ranged around the walls of the great chamber, glittering vaguely through the gloom. He hooked the lamp to his belt and started to examine them.

Here was treasure, indeed! There were suits of mail of the finest workmanship, blazoned with patterns of unfamiliar jewels. There were strangely shaped helmets of unfamiliar glistening metals. A heavy throne-like chair of gold, subtly inlaid in dark metal, had a big tawny gem burning in each arm-post.

All these things, Carse knew, were incredibly ancient. They must come from the farthest past of Mars.

"Let us hurry!" Penkawr pleaded.

Carse relaxed and grinned at his own forgetfulness. The scholar in him had for the moment superseded the looter.

"We'll take all we can carry of the smaller jeweled things," he said. "This first haul alone will make us rich."

"But you'll be twice as rich as I," Penkawr said sourly. "I could have got an Earthman in Barrakesh to sell these things for me for a half share only."

Carse laughed. "You should have done so, Penkawr. When you ask help from a noted specialist you have to pay high fees."

His circuit of the chamber had brought him back to the altar. Now he saw that behind the altar lay a door. He went through it, Penkawr following reluctantly at his heels.

Beyond the doorway was a short passage and at the end of it a door of metal, small and heavily barred. The bars had been lifted, and the door stood open an inch or two. Above it was an inscription in the ancient changeless High Martian characters, which Carse read with practised ease.

The doom of Rhiannon, dealt unto him forever by the Quiru who are lords of space and time!

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Carse pushed the metal door aside and stepped through. And then he stood quite still, looking.

Beyond the door was a great stone chamber as large as the one behind him.

But in this room there was only one thing.

It was a great bubble of darkness. A big, brooding sphere of quivering blackness, through which shot little coruscating particles of brilliance like falling stars seen from another world. And from this weird bubble of throbbing darkness the lamplight recoiled, afraid.

Something—awe, superstition or some purely physical force—sent a cold tingling shock racing through Carse's body. He felt his hair rising and his flesh seemed to draw away from his bones. He tried to speak and could not, his throat knotted with anxiety and tension.

"This is the thing I told you of," whispered Penkawr. "This is the thing I told you I saw."

Carse hardly heard him. A conjecture so vast that he could not grasp it shook his brain. The scholar's ecstasy was upon him, the ecstasy of discovery that is akin to madness.

This brooding bubble of darkness—it was strangely like the darkness of those blank black spots far out in the galaxy which some scientists have dreamed are holes in the continuum itself, windows into the infinite outside our universe!

Incredible, surely, and yet that cryptic Quiru inscription—fascinated by the thing, despite its aura of danger, Carse took two steps toward it.

He heard the swift scrape of sandals on the stone floor behind him as Penkawr moved fast. Carse knew instantly that he had blundered in turning his back on the disgruntled little thief. He started to whirl and raise the sword.

Penkawr's thrusting hands jabbed his back before he could complete the movement. Carse felt himself pitched into the brooding blackness.

He felt a terrible rending shock through each atom of his body, and then the world seemed to fall away from him.

"Go share, Rhiannon's doom, Earthman! I told you I could get another partner!"

Penkawr's snarling shout came to him from a great distance as he tumbled into a black, bottomless infinity.

CHAPTER II

Alien World

CARSE seemed to plunge through a nighted abyss, buffeted by all the shrieking winds of space. An endless, endless fall with the timelessness and the choking horror of a nightmare.

He struggled with the fierce revulsion of an animal trapped by the unknown. His struggle was not physical, for in that blind and screaming nothingness his body was useless. It was a mental fight, the man's inner core of courage reasserting itself, willing itself to stop this nightmare fall through darkness.

And then as he fell, a more terrifying sensation shook him. A feeling that he was *not alone* in this nightmare plunge through infinity, that a dark strong pulsating presence was close beside him, grasping for him, groping with eager fingers for his brain.

Carse made a supreme desperate mental effort. His sensation of falling seemer to lessen and then he felt solid rock slipping under his hands and feet. He scrambled frantically forward, in physical effort this time.

He found himself quite suddenly outside the dark bubble again on the floor of the inner chamber of the Tomb.

"What in the Nine Hells . . ." he began shakily and then stopped because the oath seemed so pitifully inadequate for what had happened.

The little krypton-lamp hooked to his belt still cast its reddish glow, the sword of Rhiannon still glittered in his hand.

And the bubble of darkness still gloomed and brooded a foot away from him, flickering with its whirl of diamond motes.

Carse realized that all his nightmare plunging through space had been during the moment he was inside the bubble. What devil's trick of ancient science *was* the thing anyway? Some queer perpetual vortex of force that the mysterious Quiru of long ago had set up, he supposed.

But why had he seemed to fall through infinities inside the thing? And whence had come that terrifying sensation of strong fingers groping eagerly at his brain as he fell?

"A trick of old Quiru science," he muttered shakenly. "And Penkawr's superstí-

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tions made him think he could kill me by pushing me into it."

Penkawr? Carse leaped to his feet, the sword of Rhiannon glittering wickedly in his hand.

"Blast his thieving little soul!"

Penkawr was not here now. But he wouldn't have had time to go far. The smile on Carse's face was not pleasant as he went through the doorway.

In the outer chamber he suddenly stopped dead. There were things here now—big strange glittering objects—that had not been here before.

Where had they come from? Had he been longer in that bubble of darkness than he thought? Had Penkawr found these things in hidden crypts and ranged them here to await his return?

Carse's wonder increased as he examined the objects that now loomed amid the mail and other relics he had seen before. These objects did not look like mere art-relics—they looked like carefully fashioned, complicated instruments of unguessable purpose.

The biggest of them was a crystal wheel, the size of a small table, mounted horizontally atop a dull metal sphere. The wheel's rim glistened with jewels cut in precise polyhedrons. And there were other smaller devices of linked crystal prisms and tubes and things built of concentric metal rings and squat looped tubes of massive metal.

Could these glittering objects be the incomprehensible devices of an ancient alien Martian science? That supposition seemed incredible. The Mars of the far past, scholars knew, had been a world of only rudimentary science, a world of sword-fighting sea-warriors whose galleys and kingdoms had clashed on long-lost oceans.

Yet, perhaps, in the Mars of the even *farther* past, there had been a science whose techniques were unfamiliar and unrecognizable?

"But where could Penkawr have found them when we didn't see them before? And why didn't he take any of them with him?"

Memory of Penkawr reminded him that the little thief would be getting farther away every moment. Grimly gripping the sword, Carse turned and hurried down the square stone corridor toward the outer world.

As he strode on Carse became aware that the air in the tomb was now strangely damp. Moisture glistened on the walls. He had not noticed that most un-Martian dampness be-

Carse seemed to plunge through a nighted abyss, filled with an alien presence (CHAP. II)

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fore and it startled him.

"Probably seepage from underground springs, like those that feed the canals," he thought. "But it wasn't there before."

His glance fell on the floor of the corridor. The drifted dust lay over it thickly as when they had entered. But there were no footprints in it now. No prints at all except those he was now making.

A HORRIBLE doubt, a feeling of unreality, clawed at Carse. The un-Martian dampness, the vanishing of their footprints—what had happened to everything in the moment he'd been inside the dark bubble?

He came to the end of the square stone corridor. And it was closed. It was closed by a massive slab of monolithic stone.

Carse stopped, staring at the slab. He fought down his increasing sense of weird unreality and made explanations for himself.

"There must have been a stone door I didn't see—and Penkawr has closed it to lock me in."

He tried to move the slab. It would not budge nor was there any sign of key, knob or hinge.

Finally Carse stepped back and leveled his proton-pistol. Its hissing streak of atomic flame crackled into the rock slab, searing and splitting it.

The slab was thick. He kept the trigger of his gun depressed for minutes. Then, with a hollowly reverberating crash, the fragments of the split slab fell back in toward him.

But beyond, instead of the open air, there lay a solid mass of dark red soil.

"The whole Tomb of Rhiannon—buried, now! Penkawr must have started a cave-in."

Carse didn't believe that. He didn't believe it at all but he tried to make himself believe, for he was becoming more and more afraid. And the thing of which he was afraid was impossible.

With blind anger he used the flaming beam of the pistol to undercut the mass of soil that blocked his way. He worked outward until the beam suddenly died as the charge of the gun ran out. He flung away the useless pistol and attacked the hot smoking mass of soil with the sword.

Panting, dripping, his mind a whirl of confused speculations, he dug outward through the soft soil till a small hole of brilliant daylight opened in front of him.

Daylight? Then he'd been in that weird bubble of darkness longer than he had imagined.

The wind blew in through the little opening, upon his face. And it was a warm wind. A warm wind and a *damp* wind, such as never blows on desert Mars.

Carse squeezed through and stood in the bright day looking outward.

There are times when a man has no emotion, no reaction. Times when all the centers are numbed and the eyes see and the ears hear but nothing communicates itself to the brain, which is protected in this way from madness.

He tried finally to laugh at what he saw though he heard his own laughter as a dry choking cry.

"Mirage, of course," he whispered. "A big mirage. Big as all Mars."

The warm breeze lifted Carse's tawny hair, blew his cloak against him. A cloud drifted over the sun and somewhere a bird screamed harshly. He did not move.

He was looking at an ocean.

It stretched out to the horizon ahead, a vast restlessness of water, milky-white and pale with a shimmering phosphorescence even in daylight.

"Mirage," he said again stubbornly, his reeling mind clinging with the desperation of fear to that one shred of explanation. "It has to be. Because this is still Mars."

Still Mars, still the same planet. The same high hills up into which Penkawr had led him by night.

Or were they the same? Before, the fox-hole entrance to the Tomb of Rhiannon had been in a steep cliff-face. Now he stood on the grassy slope of a great hill.

And there were rolling green hills and dark forest down there below him, where before had been only desert. Green hills, green woods and a bright brawling river that ran down a gorge to what had been dead sea-bottom but was now—sea.

Carse's numbed gaze swept along the great coast of the distant shoreline. And down on that far sunlit coast he saw the glitter of a white city and knew that it was Jekkara.

Jekkara, bright and strong between the verdant hills and the mighty ocean, that ocean that had not been seen upon Mars for nearly a million years.

MATTHEW CARSE knew then that it was no mirage. He sat and hid his face in his hands. His body was shaken by

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deep tremors and his nails bit into his own flesh until blood trickled down his cheeks.

He knew now what had happened to him in that vortex of darkness, and it seemed to him that a cold voice repeated a certain warning inscription in tones of distant thunder.

"The Quiru are lords of space and time—*of time*—OF TIME!"

Carse, staring out over the green hills and the milky ocean, made a terrible effort to grapple with the incredible.

"I have come into the past of Mars. All my life I have studied and dreamed of that past. Now I am in it. I, Matthew Carse, archaeologist, renegade, looter of tombs.

"The Quiru for their own reasons built a way and I came through it. Time is to us the unknown dimension but the Quiru knew it!"

Carse had studied science. You had to know the elements of a half-dozen sciences to be a planetary archaeologist. He frantically ransacked memory now for an explanation.

Had his first guess about that bubble of darkness been right? Was it really a hole in the continuum of the universe? If that were so he could dimly understand what had happened to him.

For the space-time continuum of the universe was finite, limited. Einstein and Riemann had proved that long ago. And he had fallen clear out of that continuum and then back into it again—but into a different time-frame from his own.

What was it that Kaufman had once written? "The Past is the Present-that-exists-at-a-distance." He had come back into that other distant Present, that was all. There was no reason to be afraid.

But he *was* afraid. The horror of that nightmare transition to this green and smiling Mars of long ago wrenched a gusty cry from his lips.

Blindly, still gripping the jewelled sword, he leaped up and turned to re-enter the buried Tomb of Rhiannon.

"I can go back the way I came, back through that hole in the continuum."

He stopped, a convulsive shudder running through his frame. He could not make himself face again that bubble of glittering gloom, that dreadful plunge through inter-dimensional infinity.

He dared not. He had not the Quiru's wisdom. In that perilous plunge across time mere chance had flung him into this past age. He could not count on chance to return him to his own far-future age.

"I'm here," he said. "I'm here in the distant past of Mars and I'm here to stay."

He turned back around and gazed out again upon that incredible vista. He stayed there a long time, unmoving. The sea-birds came and looked at him and flashed away on their sharp white wings. The shadows lengthened.

His eyes swung again to the white towers of Jekkara down in the distance, queenly in the sunlight above the harbor. It was not the Jekkara he knew, the thieves' city of the Low Canals, rotting away into dust, but it was a link to the familiar and Carse desperately needed such a link.

He would go to Jekkara. And he would try not to think. He must not think at all or surely his mind would crack.

Carse gripped the haft of the jeweled sword and started down the grassy slope of the hill.

CHAPTER III

City of the Past

IT WAS a long way to the city. Carse moved at a steady plodding pace. He did not try to find the easiest path but rammed his way through and over all obstacles, never deviating from the straight line that led to Jekkara. His cloak hampered him and he tore it off. His face was empty of all expression but sweat ran down his cheeks and mingled with the salt of tears.

He walked between two worlds. He went through valleys drowsing in the heat of the summer day, where leafy branches of strange trees raked his face and the juice of crushed grasses stained his sandals. Life, winged and furred and soft of foot, fled from him with a stir and a rustle. And yet he knew that he walked in a desert, where even the wind had forgotten the names of the dead for whom it mourned.

He crossed high ridges, where the sea lay before him and he could hear the boom of the surf on the beaches. And yet he saw only a vast dead plain, where the dust ran in little wavelets among the dry reefs. The truths of thirty years living are not easily forgotten.

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The sun sank slowly toward the horizon. As Carse topped the last ridge above the city and started down he walked under a vault of flame. The sea burned as the white phosphorescence took color from the clouds. With dazed wonder Carse saw the gold and crimson and purple splash down the long curve of the sky and run out over the water.

He could look down upon the harbor. The docks of marble that he had known so well, worn and cracked by ages and whelmed by desert sand, lying lonely beneath the moons. The same docks, and yet now, mirage-like, the sea filled the basin of the harbor.

Round-hulled trading ships lay against the quays and the shouts of stevedores and sweating slaves rose up to him on the evening air. Shallops came and went amid the ships and out beyond the breakwater he saw the fishing fleet of Jekkara coming home with sails of cinnabar dark against the west.

By the palace quays, near the very spot where he had gone with Penkawr to see the sword of Rhiannon, a long lean dark war-galley with a brazen ram crouched like a sullen black panther. Beyond it were other galleys. And above them, tall and proud, the white towers of the palace rose.

"I have come far back into the past of Mars indeed! For this is the Mars of a million years ago that archaeology has always pictured!"

A planet of conflicting civilizations which had developed little science yet but which cherished a legend of the super-science of the great Quiru who had been before even this time.

"A planet of the lost past that God's law intended no man of my own time ever to see!"

Matthew Carse shivered as though it were very cold. Slowly, slowly, he went down into the streets of Jekkara and it seemed to him, in the sunset, that the whole city was stained with blood.

The walls closed him in. There was a mist before his eyes and a roaring in his ears but he was aware of people. Lean lithe men and women who passed him in the narrow ways, who jostled against him and went on, then stopped and turned to stare. The dark and catlike people of Jekkara, Jekkara of the Low Canals and of this other age.

He heard the music of the harps and the chiming whisper of the little bells the women wore. The wind touched his face but it was a moist wind and warm, heavy with the breath of the sea, and it was more than a man could bear.

Carse went on but he had no idea where he was going or what he had to do. He went on only because he was already moving and had not the wit to stop.

One foot before the other, stolid, blind, like a man bewitched, he walked through the streets among the dark Jekkarans, a tall blond man trailing a naked sword.

The people of the city watched him. People of the harbor-side, of the wine-shops and the twisting alleys. They drew away before and closed in behind, following and staring at him.

The gap of ages lay between them. His kilt was of a strange cloth, an unknown dye. His ornaments were of a time and country they would never see. And his face was alien.

This very alienage held them back for a time. Some breath of the incredible truth clung to him and made them afraid. Then someone said a name and someone else repeated it and in the space of a few seconds there was no more mystery, no more fear—only hate.

CARSE heard the name. Dimly, from a great distance, he heard it as it grew from a whisper into a howling cry that ran wolf-like through the streets.

"Khond! Khond! A spy from Khondor!" And then another word. *"Slay!"*

The name of "Khond" meant nothing to Carse, but he recognized it for what it was, an epithet and a curse. The voice of the mob carried to him the warning of death and he tried to rouse himself for the instinct of survival is strong. But his brain was numbed and would not wake.

A stone struck him on the cheek. The physical shock brought him to a little. Blood ran into his mouth. The salt-sweet taste of it told him of destruction already begun. He tried to shake the dark veils aside, far enough at least to see the enemy that threatened him.

He had come out into an open space by the docks. Now, in the twilight, the sea flamed with cold white fire. Masts of the moored ships stood black against it. Phobos was rising, and in the mingled light Carse saw that there were creatures climbing into

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Carse saw the eyes of Emer and the wise ones grow dim as the cloudy jewel cleared and brightened (CHAP. XII)

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the rigging of the ships and that they were furred and chained and not wholly human.

And he saw on the wharfside two slender white-skinned men with wings. They wore the loin-cloth of the slave and their wings were broken.

The square was filled with people. More of them poured in from the narrow alley-mouths, drawn by the shout of *Spy!* It echoed from the buildings and the name of "Khondor" hammered at him.

From the wharfside, from the winged slaves and the chained creatures of the ships, a fervent cry reached him.

"Hail, Khondor! Fight, man!"

Women screamed like harpies. Another stone whistled past his ear. The mob surged and jostled but those nearest Carse held back, wary of the great jeweled sword with its shining blade.

Carse shouted. He swung the sword in a humming arc around him and the Jekkarans, who had shorter blades, melted back.

Again from the wharfside he heard, "Hail, Khondor! Down with the Serpent, down with Sark! Fight, Khond!"

He knew that the slaves would have helped him if they could.

One part of his mind was beginning to function now—the part that had to do with a long experience in saving his own neck. He was only a few paces away from the buildings at his back. He whirled and leaped suddenly, the bright steel swinging.

It bit twice into flesh and then he had gained the doorway of a ship's chandler, so that they could only come at him from the front. A small advantage but every second a man could stay alive was a second gained.

He made a flickering barrier of steel before him and then bellowed, in their own High Martian, "Wait! I am no Khond!"

The crowd broke into jeering laughter.

"He says he is not of Khondor!"

"Your own friends hail you, Khond! Hark to the Swimmers and the Skyfolk!"

Carse cried, "No! I am not of Khondor. I am not—" He stopped short. He had almost said he was not of Mars.

A green-eyed girl, hardly more than a child, darted almost into the circle of death he wove before him. Her teeth showed white as a rat's.

"Coward!" she screamed. "Fool! Where but in Khondor do they breed men like you, with pale hair and sickly skin? Where else could you be from, oh clumsy thing with the barbarous speech?"

Something of the strange look returned to Carse's face and he said, "I am from Jekkara."

They laughed. They shrieked with laughter until the square rocked with it. Now they had lost all awe of him. His every word stamped him as what the girl had called him, a coward and a fool. Almost contemptuously, they attacked.

This was real enough to Carse, this mass of hate-filled faces and wicked short-swords coming at him. He struck out ragingly with the long sword of Rhiannon, his rage less against this murderous rabble than against the fate that had pitchforked him into their world.

Several of them died on the jeweled sword and the rest drew back. They stood glaring at him like jackals who have trapped a wolf. Then through their hissing came an exultant cry.

"The Sark soldiers are coming! They'll cut down this Khond spy for us!"

Carse, backed against a locked door and panting, saw a little phalanx of black-mailed black-helmed warriors pushing through the rabble like a ship through waves.

They were coming straight toward him and the Jekkarans were already yelling in eager anticipation of the kill.

CHAPTER IV

Perilous Secret

THE door against which Carse's back was braced suddenly gave way, opening inward. He reeled backward into the black interior.

As he staggered for balance the door suddenly slammed shut again. He heard a bar fall and then a low, throaty chuckle from beside him.

"That will hold them for a while. But we'd better get out of here quickly, Khond. Those Sark soldiers will cut the door open."

Carse swung around, his sword raised, but was blind in the darkness of the room. He could smell rope and tar and dust but could see nothing.

A frantic hammering began outside the door. Then Carse's eyes, becoming accustomed to the obscurity, made out a ponder-

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ous corpulent figure close beside him.

The man was big, fleshy and soft-looking, a Martian who wore a kilt that looked ridiculously scanty on his fat figure. His face was moonlike, creased and crinkled in a reassuring grin as his small eyes looked unfearingly at Carse's raised sword.

"I'm no Jekkaran or Sark either," he said reassuringly. "I'm Boghaz Hoi of Valkis and I've my own reasons for helping any man of Khond. But we'll have to go quickly."

"Go where?"

Carse had to drag the words out, he was still breathing so painfully.

"To a place of safety." The other paused as new louder hammering began upon the door. "That's the Sarks. I'm leaving. Come or stay as you like, Khond."

He turned toward the back of the dark room, moving with astonishing lightness and ease for one so corpulent. He did not look back to see if Carse was following.

But there was really no choice for Carse. Half-dazed as he still was he was of no mind to face the eruption of those mailed soldiers and the Jekkaran rabble. He followed Boghaz Hoi.

The Valkisian chuckled as he squeezed his bulk through a small open window at the rear of the room.

"I know every rathole in this harbor quarter. That's why, when I saw you backed against old Taras Thur's door, I simply went around through and let you in. Snatched you from under their noses."

"But why?" Carse asked again.

"I told you—I have a sympathy for Khonds. They're men enough to snap their fingers at Sark and the damned Serpent. I help one when I can."

It didn't make sense to Carse. But how could it? How could he know anything of the hates and passions of this Mars of the remote past?

He was trapped in this strange Mars of long ago and he had to grope his way in it like an ignorant child. It was certain that the mob out there had tried to kill him.

They had taken him for a Khond. Not the Jekkaran rabble alone but those strange slaves—the semi-humans with the broken wings, the furred sleek chained creatures who had cheered him from the galleys.

Carse shivered. Until now, he had been too dazed to think of the strangeness of those not-quite-human slaves.

And who were the Khonds?

"This way," Boghaz Hoi interrupted his thoughts.

They had threaded a shadowy little labyrinth of stinking alleys and the fat Valkisian was squeezing through a narrow door into the dark interior of a little hut.

Carse followed him inside. He heard the whistle of the blow in the dark and tried to dodge but there was no time.

The concussion exploded a bomb of stars inside his head and he felt the rough floor grinding his face.

He awoke with flickering light in his eyes. There was a small bronze lamp burning on a stool close to him. He was lying on the dirt floor of the hut. When he tried to move he found that his wrists and ankles were bound to pegs driven into the packed earth.

Sickening pain racked his head and he sank back. There was a rustle of movement and Boghaz Hoi crouched down beside him. The Valkisian's moonface was expressive of sympathy as he held a clay cup of water to Carse's lips.

"I struck too hard I'm afraid. But then, in the dark with an armed man, one has to be careful. Do you feel like talking now?"

Carse looked up at him and old habit made him control the rage that shook him. "About what?" he asked.

Boghaz said, "I am a frank and truthful man. When I saved you from the mob out there my only idea was to rob you."

Carse saw that his jeweled belt and collar had been transferred to Boghaz, who wore them both around his neck. The Valkisian now raised a plump hand and fingered them lovingly.

"Then," he continued, "I got a closer look—at that." He nodded toward the jeweled sword that leaned against the stool, shimmering in the lamplight. "Now, many men would examine it and see only a handsome sword. But I, Boghaz, am a man of education. I recognized the symbols on that blade."

He leaned forward. "Where did you get it?"

A WARNING instinct made Carse lie readily. "I bought it from a trader."

Boghaz shook his head. "No you didn't. There are spots of corrosion on the blade, scales of dust in the carvings. The hilt has not been polished. No trader would sell it in that condition.

"No, my friend, that sword has lain a

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long time in the dark, in the tomb of him who owned it—the tomb of Rhiannon."

Carse lay without moving, looking at Boghaz. He did not like what he saw.

The Valkisian had a kind and merry face. He would be excellent company over a bottle of wine. He would love a man like a brother and regret exceedingly the necessity of cutting out his heart.

Carse schooled his expression into sullen blankness. "It may be Rhiannon's sword for all I know. Nevertheless, I bought it from a trader."

The mouth of Boghaz, which was small and pink, puckered and he shook his head. He reached out and patted Carse's cheek.

"Please don't lie to me, friend. It upsets me to be lied to."

"I'm not lying," Carse said. "Listen—you have the sword. You have my ornaments. You have all you can get out of me. Just be satisfied."

Boghaz sighed. He looked down appealingly at Carse. "Have you no gratitude? Didn't I save your life?"

Carse said sardonically, "It was a noble gesture."

"It was. It was indeed. If I'm caught for it my life won't be worth *that.*" He snapped his fingers. "I cheated the mob of a moment's pleasure and it wouldn't do a bit of good now to tell them that you really aren't a Khond at all."

He let that fall very casually but he watched Carse shrewdly from under his fat eyelids.

Carse looked back at him, hard-eyed, and his face showed nothing.

"What gave you that idea?"

Boghaz laughed. "No Khond would be ass enough to show his face in Jekkara to begin with. And especially if he'd found the lost secret all Mars has hunted for an age—the secret of the Tomb of Rhiannon."

Carse's face moved no muscle but he was thinking swiftly. So the Tomb was a lost mystery in *this* time as in his own future time?

He shrugged. "I know nothing of Rhiannon or his Tomb."

Boghaz squatted down on the floor beside Carse and smiled down at him like one humoring a child who wishes to play.

"My friend, you are not being honest with me. There's no man on Mars who doesn't know that the Quiru long, long ago left our world because of what Rhiannon, the Cursed One among them, had done. And all men know they built a secret tomb before they left, in which they locked Rhiannon and his powers.

"Is it wonderful that men should covet the powers of the gods? Is it strange that ever since men have hunted that lost Tomb? And now that you have found it do I, Boghaz, blame you for wanting to keep the secret to yourself?"

He patted Carse's shoulder and beamed.

"It is but natural on your part. But the secret of the Tomb is too big for you to handle. You need my brains to help you. Together, with that secret, we can take what we want of Mars."

Carse said without emotion, "You're crazy. I have no secret. I bought the sword from a trader."

BOGHAZ stared at him for a long moment. He stared very sadly. Then he sighed heavily.

"Think, my friend. Wouldn't it be better to tell me than to make me force it out of you?"

"There's nothing to tell," Carse said harshly.

He did not wish to be tortured. But that odd warning instinct had returned more strongly. Something deep within him warned him not to tell the secret of the Tomb!

And anyway, even if he told, the fat Valkisian was likely to kill him then to prevent him from telling anyone else the secret.

Boghaz sorrowfully shrugged fat shoulders. "You force me to extreme measures. And I hate that. I'm too chicken-hearted for this work. But if it's necessary—"

He was reaching into his belt-pouch for something when suddenly both men heard a sound of voices in the alleyway outside and the tramp of heavily-shod feet.

Outside, a voice cried, *"There!* That is the sty of the Boghaz hog!"

A fist began to hammer on the door with such force that the small room rang like the inside of a drum.

"Open up, there, fat scum of Valkis!"

Heavy shoulders began to heave against the door.

"Gods of Mars!" groaned Boghaz. "That Sark press-gang has tracked us down!"

He grabbed up the sword of Rhiannon and was in the act of hiding it in his bed when the warped planks of the door gave

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under the tremendous beating, and a spate of armed men burst into the room.

CHAPTER V

Slave of Sark

BOGHAZ recovered himself with magnificent aplomb. He bowed deeply to the leader of the press-gang, a huge black-bearded, hawk-nosed man wearing the same black mail that Carse had seen on the Sark soldiers in the square.

"My lord Scyld!" said Boghaz. "I regret that I am corpulent, and therefore slow of motion. I would not for worlds have given your lordship the trouble of breaking my poor door, especially"—his face beamed with the light of pure innocence—"especially as I was about to set out in search of you."

He gestured toward Carse.

"I have him for you, you see," he said. "I have him safe."

Scyld set his fists on his hips, thrust his spade beard up into the air and laughed. Behind him the soldiers of the press-gang took it up and, behind them, the rabble of Jekkarans who had come to see the fun.

"He has him safe," said Scyld, "for us."

More laughter.

Scyld stepped closer to Boghaz. "I suppose," he said, "that it was your loyalty that prompted you to spirit this Khond dog away from my men in the first place."

"My lord," protested Boghaz, "the mob would have killed him."

"That's why my men went in—we wanted him alive. A dead Khond is of no use to us. But you had to be helpful, Boghaz. Fortunately you were seen." He reached out and fingered the stolen ornaments that Boghaz wore around his neck. "Yes," said Scyld, "very fortunately."

He wrenched the collar and the belt away, admired the play of light on the jewels and dropped them into his belt-pouch. Then he moved to the bed, where the sword lay half-concealed among the blankets. He picked it up, felt the weight and balance of the blade, examined casually the chasing on the steel and smiled.

"A real weapon," he said. "Beautiful as the Lady herself—and just as deadly."

He used the point to cut Carse free of his bonds.

"Up, Khond," he said, and helped him with the toe of his heavy sandal.

Carse staggered to his feet and shook his head once to clear it. Then, before the men of the press-gang could grasp him, he smashed his hard fist savagely into the expansive belly of Boghaz.

Scyld laughed. He had a deep, hearty seaman's laugh. He kept guffawing as his soldiers pulled Carse away from the doubled-up gasping Valkisian.

"No need for that now," Scyld told him. "There's plenty of time. You two are going to see a lot of each other."

Carse watched a horrible realization break over the fat face of Boghaz.

"My lord," quavered the Valkisian, still gasping. "I am a loyal man. I wish only to serve the interests of Sark and her Highness, the Lady Ywain." He bowed.

"Naturally," said Scyld. "And how could you better serve both Sark and the Lady Ywain than by pulling an oar in her war-galley?"

Boghaz was losing color by the second. "But, my lord—"

[*Turn page*]

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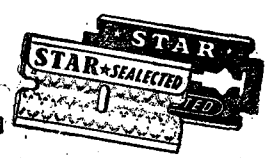

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"What?" cried Scyld fiercely. "You protest? Where is your loyalty, Boghaz?" He raised the sword. "You know what the penalty is for treason."

The men of the press-gang were near to bursting with suppressed laughter.

"Nay," said Boghaz hoarsely. "I am loyal. No one can accuse me of treason. I wish only to serve—" He stopped short, apparently realizing that his own tongue had trapped him neatly.

Scyld brought the flat of the blade down in a tremendous thwack across Boghaz' enormous buttocks.

"Go then and serve!" he shouted.

Boghaz leaped forward, howling. The press-gang grabbed him. In a few seconds they had shackled him and Carse securely together.

Scyld complacently thrust the sword of Rhiannon into his own sheath after tossing his own blade to a soldier to carry. He led the way swaggeringly out of the hut.

Once again, Carse made a pilgrimage through the streets of Jekkara but this time by night and in chains, stripped of his jewels and his sword.

It was to the palace quays they went, and the cold shivering thrill of unreality came again upon Carse as he looked at the high towers ablaze with light and the soft white fires of the sea that glowed far out in the darkness.

The whole palace quarter swarmed with slaves, with men-at-arms in the sable mail of Sark, with courtiers and women and jongleurs. Music and the sounds of revelry came from the palace itself as they passed beneath it.

Boghaz spoke to Carse in a rapid undertone. "The blockheads didn't recognize that sword. Keep quiet about your secret—or they'd take us both to Caer Dhu for questioning and you know what *that* means!" He shuddered over all his great body.

Carse was too numbed to answer. Reaction from this incredible world and from sheer physical fatigue was sweeping over him like a wave.

Boghaz continued loudly for the benefit of their guards. "All this splendor is in honor of the Lady Ywain of Sark! A princess as great as her father, King Garach! To serve in *her* galley will be a privilege."

SCYLD laughed mockingly. "Well said, Valkisian! And your fervent loyalty shall be rewarded. That privilege will be yours a long time."

The black war-galley loomed up before them, their destination. Carse saw that it was long, rakish, with a rowers' pit splitting its deck down the middle and a low stern-castle aft.

Flamboys were blazing on the low poop-deck back there and ruddy light spilled from the windows of the cabins beneath it. Sark soldiers clustered back there, chaffing each other loudly.

But in the long dark rowers' pit there was only a bitter silence.

Scyld raised his bull voice in a shout. "Ho, there, Callus!"

A large man came grunting out of the shadowy pit, negotiating the catwalk with praticed skill. His right hand clutched a leathern bottle and his left a black whip—a longlashed thing, supple from much using.

He saluted Scyld with the bottle, not troubling to speak.

"Fodder for the benches," Scyld said. "Take them," He chuckled. "And see that they're chained to the same oar."

Callus looked at Carse and Boghaz, then smiled lazily and gestured with the bottle. "Get aft, carrion," he grunted and let the lash run out.

Carse glared at him out of red eyes and snarled. Boghaz gripped the Earthman by the shoulder and shook him.

"Come on, fool!" he said. "We'll get enough beatings without you asking for them."

He pulled Carse with him, down into the rowers' pit and forward along the catwalk between the benches.

The Earthman, numbed by shock and exhaustion, was only dimly aware of faces turned to watch them, of the mutter of chains and the smell of the bilges. He only half saw the round curious heads of the two furry creatures who slept on the catwalk and who moved to let them pass.

The last starboard bench facing the stern-castle had only one sleeping man chained to its oar, its other two places being empty. The press-gang stood by until Carse and Boghaz were safely chained.

Then they went off with Scyld. Callus cracked his whip with a sound like a gunshot, apparently as a reminder to all hands, and went forward.

Boghaz nudged Carse in the ribs. Then he leaned over and shook him. But Carse

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was beyond caring what Boghaz had to say. He was sound asleep, doubled over the loom of the oar.

Carse dreamed. He dreamed that he was again taking that nightmare plunge through the shrieking infinities of the dark bubble in Rhiannon's tomb. He was falling, falling—

And again he had that sensation of a strong, living presence close beside him in the awful plunge, of something grasping at his brain with a dark and dreadful eagerness.

"No!" Carse whispered in his dream. *"No!"*

He husked that refusal again—a refusal of something that the dark presence was asking him to do, something veiled and frightful.

But the pleading became more urgent, more insistent, and whatever it was that pleaded seemed now far stronger than in the Tomb of Rhiannon. Carse uttered a shuddering cry.

"No, Rhiannon!"

He found himself suddenly awake, looking dazedly along the moonlit oar-bank.

Callus and the overseer were striding along the catwalk, lashing the slaves to wakefulness. Boghaz was looking at Carse with a strange expression.

"You cried out to the Cursed One!" he said.

The other slave at their oar was staring at him too and so were the luminous eyes of the two furry shadows chained to the catwalk.

"A bad dream," Carse muttered. "That was all."

He was interrupted by a whistle and crack and a searing pain along his back.

"Stand to your oar, carrion!" roared Callus' voice from above him.

Carse voiced a tigerish cry but Boghaz instantly stopped his mouth with one big paw. "Steady!" he warned. "Steady!"

Carse got hold of himself but not in time to avoid another stroke of the whip. Callus stood grinning down at him.

"You'll want care," he said. "Care, and watching."

Then he lifted his head and yelled along the oarbank. "All right, you scum, you carrion! Sit up to it! We're starting on the tide for Sark and I'll flay alive the first man who loses stroke!"

Overhead seamen were busy in the rigging. The sails fell wide from the yards, dark in the moonlight.

There was a sudden pregnant silence along the ship, a drawing of breath and tightening of sinews. On a platform at the end of the catwalk a slave crouched ready over a great hide drum.

An order was given. The fist of the drummer clenched and fell.

All along the oar-bank the great sweeps shot out, found water, bit and settled to a steady rhythm. The drum-beat gave the time and the lash enforced it. Somehow Carse and Boghaz managed to do what they had to do.

The rowers' pit was too deep for sight, except what one could glimpse through the oar-ports. But Carse heard the full-throated cheer of the crowd on the quays as the war-galley of Ywain of Sark cleared the slip, standing out into the open harbor.

The night breeze was light and the sails drew little. The drum picked up the beat, drove it faster, sent the long sweeps swinging and set the scarred and sweating backs of the slaves to their full stretch and strain.

Carse felt the lift of the hull to the first swell of the open sea. Through the oarport, he glimpsed a heaving ocean of milky flame. He was bound for Sark across the White Sea of Mars.

CHAPTER VI

On the Martian Sea

THE galley raised a fair breeze at last and the slaves were allowed to rest. Again Carse slept. When he awoke for the second time it was dawn.

Through the oar-port he watched the sea change color with the sunrise. He had never seen anything so ironically beautiful. The water caught the pale tints of the first light and warmed them with its own phosphorescent fire—amethyst and pearl and rose and saffron. Then, as the sun rose higher, the sea changed to one sheet of burning gold.

Carse watched until the last color had faded, leaving the water white again. He was sorry when it was all gone. It was all unreal and he could pretend that he was still asleep, in Madam Kan's on the Low Canal, dreaming the dreams that come with too much *thil*.

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Boghaz snored untroubled by his side. The drummer slept beside his drum. The slaves drooped over the oars, resting.

Carse looked at them. They were a vicious, hard-bitten lot—mostly convicted criminals, he supposed. He thought he could recognize Jekkaran, Valiskian and Keshi types.

But a few of them, like the third man at his own oar, were of a different breed. Khonds, he supposed, and he could see why he had been mistaken for one of them. They were big raw-boned men with light eyes and fair or ruddy hair and a barbarian look that Carse liked.

His gaze dropped to the catwalk and he saw clearly now the two creatures who lay shackled there. The same breed as those who had cheered him in the square last night, from the wharfside ships.

They were not human. Not quite. They were kin to the seal and the dolphin, to the strong perfect loveliness of a cresting wave. Their bodies were covered with short dark fur, thinning to a fine down on the face. Their features were delicately cut, handsome. They rested but did not sleep and their eyes were open, large and dark and full of intelligence.

These, he guessed, were what the Jekkarans had referred to as Swimmers. He wondered what their function was, aboard ship. One was a man, the other a woman. He could not, somehow, think of them as merely male and female like beasts.

He realized that they were studying him with fixed curiosity. A small shiver ran over him. There was something uncanny about their eyes, as though they could see beyond ordinary horizons.

The woman spoke in a soft voice. "Welcome to the brotherhood of the lash."

Her tone was friendly. Yet he sensed in it a certain reserve, a note of puzzlement.

Carse smiled at her. "Thanks."

Again, he was conscious that he spoke the old High Martian with an accent. It was going to be a problem to explain his race, for he knew that the Khonds themselves would not make the same mistake the Jekkarans had.

The next words of the Swimmer convinced him of that. "You are not of Khondor," she said, "though you resemble its people. What is your country?"

A man's rough voice joined in. "Yes, what is it, stranger?"

Carse turned to see that the big Khond slave, who was third man on his oar, eyeing him with hostile suspicion.

The man went on, "Word went round that you were a captured Khond spy but that's a lie. More likely you're a Jekkaran masquerading as a Khond, set here among us by the Sarks."

A low growl ran through the oar bank.

Carse had known he would have to account for himself somehow and had been thinking quickly. Now he spoke up.

"I'm no Jekkaran but a tribesman from far beyond Shun. From so far that all this is like a new world to me."

"You might be," the big Khond conceded grudgingly. "You've got a queer look and way of talking. What brought you and this hog of Valkis aboard?"

Boghaz was awake now and the fat Valkisian answered hastily. "My friend and I were wrongfully accused of theft by the Sarks! The shame of it—I, Boghaz of Valkis, convicted of pilfering! An outrage on justice!"

The Khond spat disgustedly and turned away. "I thought so."

Presently Boghaz found an opportunity to whisper to Carse. "They think now we're a pair of condemned thieves. Best let them think so, my friend."

"What are you but that?" Carse retorted brutally.

Boghaz studied him with shrewd little eyes. "What are *you*, friend?"

"You heard me—I come from far beyond Shun."

From beyond Shun and from beyond this whole world, Carse thought grimly. But he couldn't tell these people the incredible truth about himself.

The fat Valkisian shrugged. "If you wish to stick to that it's all right with me. I trust you implicitly. Are we not partners?"

CARSE smiled sourly at that ingenuous question. There was something about the impudence of this fat thief which he found amusing.

Boghaz detected his smile. "Ah, you are thinking of my unfortunate violence toward you last night. It was mere impulsiveness. We shall forget it. I, Boghaz, have already forgotten it," he added magnanimously.

"The fact remains that you, my friend, possess the secret of"—he lowered his voice to a murmur—"of the Tomb of Rhiannon. It's lucky that Scyld was too ignorant to

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recognize the sword! For that secret, rightly exploited, can make us the biggest men on Mars!"

Carse asked him, "Why is the Tomb of Rhiannon so important?"

The question took Boghaz off guard. He looked startled.

"Do you pretend that you don't even know that?"

Carse reminded, "I told you I come from so far that this is all a new world to me."

Boghaz' fat face showed mixed incredulity and puzzlement. Finally he said, "I can decide whether you're really what you say or whether you're pretending childish ignorance for your own reasons."

He shrugged. "Whichever is the case you could soon get the story from the others. I might as well be truthful."

He spoke in a rapid undertone, watching Carse shrewdly. "Even a remote barbarian will have heard of the superhuman Quiru, who long ago possessed all power and scientific wisdom. And of how the Cursed One among them, Rhiannon, sinned by teaching too much wisdom to the Dhuvians.

"Because of what that led to the Quiru left our world, going no man knows whither. But before they left they seized the sinner Rhiannon and locked him in a hidden tomb and locked in with him his instruments of awful power.

"Is it wonderful that all Mars has hunted that Tomb for an age? Is it strange that either the Empire of Sark or the Sea-Kings would do anything to possess the Cursed One's lost powers? And now that you have found the Tomb do I, Boghaz, blame you for being cautious with your secret?"

Carse ignored the last. He was remembering now—remembering those strange instruments of jewels and prisms and metal in Rhiannon's Tomb.

Were those really the secrets of an ancient, great science—a science that had long been lost to the half-barbaric Mars of this age?

He asked, "Who are these Sea-Kings? I take it that they're enemies of the Sarks?"

Boghaz nodded. "Sark rules the lands east, north and south of the White Sea. But in the west are small free kingdoms of hardy sea-rovers like the Khonds and their Sea-Kings defy the power of Sark."

He added, "Aye and there are many even in my own subject land of Valkis and elsewhere who secretly hate Sark because of the Dhuvians."

"The Dhuvians?" Carse repeated. "You mentioned them before. Who are they?"

Boghaz snorted. "Look, friend, it's all very well to pretend ignorance but that's carrying it too far! There's no tribesman from so far away that he doesn't know and fear the accursed Serpent!"

So the Serpent was a generic name from the mysterious Dhuvians? Why were they called so, Carse wondered?

CARSE became suddenly aware that the woman Swimmer was looking at him fixedly. For a startled moment he had the eery sensation that she was looking into his thoughts.

"Shallah is watching us—best be quiet now," Boghaz whispered hastily. "Everyone knows that the Halflings can read the mind a little."

If that were so, Carse thought grimly, Shallah the Swimmer must have found profoundly astonishing matter in his own thoughts.

He had been pitchforked into a wholly unfamiliar Mars, most of which was still a mystery to him.

But if Boghaz spoke truth, if those strange objects in the Tomb of Rhiannon were instruments of a great lost scientific power, then even though he was a slave he held the key to a secret coveted by all this world.

That secret could be his death. He must guard it jealously till he won free of this brutal bondage. For a resolve to regain his freedom and a grim growing hatred of the swaggering Sarks were all that he was sure of now.

The sun rose high, blazing down into the unprotected oar-pit. The wind that hummed through the taut cordage aloft did nothing to relieve the heat down here. The men broiled like fish on a griddle, and so far neither food nor water had been forthcoming.

Carse watched with sullen eyes the Sark soldiers lounging arrogantly on the deck above the sunken oar-pit. On the after part of that deck rose the low main cabin, the door to which remained closed. Atop the flat roof stood the steersman, a husky Sark sailor who held the massive tiller and who took his orders from Scyld.

Scyld himself stood up there, his spade beard thrust up as he looked unseeingly over the misery in the oar-pit toward the

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distant horizon. Occasionally he rapped out curt commands to the steersman.

RATIONS came at last—black bread and a pannikin of water, served out by one of the strange winged slaves Carse had glimpsed before in Jekkara. The Sky Folk, the mob had called them.

Carse studied this one with interest. He looked like a crippled angel, with his shining wings cruelly broken and his beautiful suffering face. He moved slowly along the catwalk at his task as though walking were a burden to him. He did not smile or speak and his eyes were veiled.

Shallah thanked him for her food. He did not look at her but went away, dragging his empty basket. She turned to Carse.

"Most of them," she said, "die when their wings are broken."

He knew she meant a death of the spirit. And sight of that broken-winged Halfling somehow gave Carse a bitterer hatred of the Sarks than his own enslavement had aroused. "Curse the brutes who would do a thing like that!" he muttered.

"Aye, cursed be they who foregather in evil with the Serpent!" growled Jaxart, the big Khond at their oar. "Cursed be their king and his she-devil daughter Ywain! Had I the chance I'd sink us all beneath the waves to thwart whatever deviltry she's been hatching at Jekkara."

"Why hasn't she shown herself?" Carse asked. "Is she so delicate that she'll keep her cabin all the way to Sark?"

"That hellcat delicate?" Jaxart spat in loathing and said, "She's wantoning with the lover hidden in her cabin. He crept aboard at Sark, all hooded and cloaked, and hasn't come out since. But we saw him."

Shallah looked aft with fixed gaze and murmured, "It is no lover she is hiding but accursed evil. I sensed it when it came aboard."

She turned her disturbing luminous gaze on Carse. "I think there is a curse on you too, stranger. I can feel it but I cannot understand you."

Carse again felt a little chill. These Halflings with their extra-sensory powers could just vaguely sense his incredible alienage. He was glad when Shallah and Naram, her mate, turned away from him.

Often in the hours that followed Carse found his gaze going up to the afterdeck. He had a grim desire to see this Ywain of Sark whose slave he now was.

In mid-afternoon, after blowing steadily for hours, the wind began to fail and dropped finally to a flat calm.

The drum thundered. The sweeps went out and once again Carse was sweating at the unfamiliar labor, snarling at the kiss of the lash on his back.

Only Boghaz seemed happy.

"I am no seafaring man," he said, shaking his head. "For a Khond like you, Jaxart, sea-roving is natural. But I was delicate in my youth and forced to quieter pursuits. Ah blessed calm! Even the drudgery of the oars is preferable to bounding like a wild thing over the waves."

Carse was touched by this pathetic speech until he discovered that Boghaz had good reason not to mind the rowing inasmuch as he was only bending back and forth while Carse and Jaxart pulled. Carse dealt him a blow that nearly knocked him off the bench and after that he pulled his weight, groaning.

The afternoon wore on, hot and endless, to the ceaseless beat of the oars.

The palms of Carse's hands blistered, then broke and bled. He was a powerful man, but even so the strength ran out of him like water and his body felt as though it had been stretched on the rack. He envied Jaxart, who behaved as though he had been born in the oar banks.

Gradually sheer exhaustion dulled his agony somewhat. He fell into a sort of drugged stupor, wherein his body performed its task mechanically.

Then, in the last golden blaze of daylight, he lifted his head to gasp for breath and saw, through the wavering haze that obscured his vision, a woman standing on the deck above him, looking at the sea.

CHAPTER VII

The Sword

SHE might be both Sark and devil as the others had said. But whatever she was, she stopped Carse's breath and held him staring.

She stood like a dark flame in a nimbus of sunset light. Her habit was that of a young warrior, a hauberk of black mail

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over a short purple tunic, with a jeweled dragon coiling on the curve of her mailed breast and a short sword at her side.

Her head was bare. She wore her black hair short, cut square above the eyes and falling to her shoulders. Under dark brows her eyes had smoldering fires in them. She stood with straight long legs braced slightly apart, peering out over the sea.

Carse felt the surge of a bitter admiration. This woman owned him and he hated her and all her race but he could not deny her burning beauty and her strength.

"*Row,* you carrion!"

The oath and the lash brought him back from his staring. He had lost stroke, fouling the whole starboard bank, and Jaxart was cursing and Callus was using the whip.

He beat them all impartially and fat Boghaz wailed at the top of his lungs, "Mercy, oh Lady Ywain! Mercy, mercy!"

"Shut up, scum!" snarled Callus and lashed them until blood ran.

Ywain glanced down into the pit. She rapped out a name. "Callus!"

The oar-bank captain bowed. "Yes, Highness."

"Pick up the beat," she said. "Faster. I want to raise the Black Banks at dawn." She looked directly at Carse and Boghaz and added, "Flog every man who loses stroke."

She turned away. The drum beat quickened. Carse looked with bitter eyes at Ywain's back. It would be good to tame this woman. It would be good to break her utterly, to tear her pride out by the roots and stamp on it.

The lash rapped out the time on his unwilling back and there was nothing for it but to row.

Jaxart grinned a wolf's grin. Between strokes he panted, "Sark rules the White Sea to hear them tell it. But the Sea Kings still come out! Even Ywain won't dawdle on the way!"

"If their enemies may be out why don't they have escort ships for this galley?" Carse asked, gasping.

Jaxart shook his head. "That I can't understand myself. I heard that Garach sent his daughter to overawe the subject king of Jekkara, who's been getting too ambitious. But why she came without escort ships—"

Boghaz suggested, "Perhaps the Dhuvians furnished her with some of their mysterious weapons for protection?"

The big Khond snorted. "The Dhuvians are too crafty to do that! They'll use their strange weapons sometimes in behalf of their Sark allies, yes. That's why the alliance exists. But *give* those weapons to Sark, teach Sarks how to use them? They're not *that* foolish!"

Carse was getting a clearer idea of this ancient Mars. These peoples were all half-barbaric—all but the mysterious Dhuvians. *They* apparently possessed at least some of the lost ancient science of this world and jealously guarded it and used it for their own and their Sark allies' purposes.

Night fell. Ywain remained on deck and the watches were doubled. Naram and Shallah, the two Swimmers, stirred restlessly in their shackles. In the torchlit gloom their eyes were luminous with some secret excitement.

Carse had neither the strength nor the inclination to appreciate the wonder of the glowing sea by moonlight. To make matters worse a headwind sprang up and roughened the waves to an ugly cross-chop that made the oars doubly difficult to handle. The drum beat inexorably.

A dull fury burned in Carse. He ached intolerably. He bled and his back was striped by fiery weals. The oar was heavy. It was heavier than all Mars and it bucked and fought him like a live thing.

Something happened to his face. A strange stony look came over it and all the color went out of his eyes, leaving them bleak as ice and not quite sane. The drumbeat merged into the pounding of his own heart, roaring louder with every painful stroke.

A wave sprang up, the long sweep crabbed, the handle took Carse across the chest and knocked the wind out of him. Jaxart, who was experienced, and Boghaz, who was heavy, regained control almost at once though not before the overseer was on hand to curse them for lazy carrion—his favorite word—and to lay on the whip.

Carse let go of the oar. He moved so fast, in spite of his hampering chains, that the overseer had no idea what was happening until suddenly he was lying across the Earthman's knees and trying to protect his head from the blows of the Earthman's wrist-cuffs.

INSTANTLY the oar-bank went mad. The stroke was hopelessly lost. Men

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shouted for the kill. Callus rushed up and hit Carse over the head with the loaded butt of his whip, knocking him half senseless. The overseer scrambled back to safety, eluding Jaxart's clutching arms. Boghaz made himself as small as possible and did nothing.

Ywain's voice came down from the deck. "Callus!"

The oar-bank captain knelt, trembling. "Yes, Highness?"

"Flog them all until they remember that they're no longer men but slaves." Her angry, impersonal gaze rested on Carse. "As for that one—he's new, isn't he?"

"Yes, Highness."

"Teach him," she said.

They taught him. Callus and the overseer together taught him. Carse bowed his head over his arms and took it. Now and again Boghaz screamed as the lash flicked too far over and caught him instead. Between his feet Carse saw dimly the red streams that trickled down into the bilges and stained the water. The rage that had burned in him chilled and altered as iron tempers under the hammer.

At last they stopped. Carse raised his head. It was the greatest effort he had ever made but stiffly, stubbornly, he raised it. He looked directly at Ywain.

"Have you learned your lesson, slave?" she asked.

It was a long time before he could form the words to answer. He was beyond caring now whether he lived or died. His whole universe was centered on the woman who stood arrogant and untouchable above him.

"Come down yourself and teach me if you can," he answered hoarsely and called her a name in the lowest vernacular of the streets—a name that said there was nothing she could teach a man.

For a moment no one moved or spoke. Carse saw her face go white and he laughed, a hoarse terrible sound in the silence. Then Scyld drew his sword and vaulted over the rail into the oar pit.

The blade flashed high and bright in the torchlight. It occurred to Carse that he had traveled a long way to die. He waited for the stroke but it did not come and then he realized that Ywain had cried out to Scyld to stop.

Scyld faltered, then turned, puzzled, looking up. "But, Highness—"

"Come here," she said, and Carse saw that she was staring at the sword in Scyld's hand, the sword of Rhiannon.

Scyld climbed the ladder back up to the deck, his black-browed face a little frightened. Ywain met him.

"Give me that," she said. And when he hesitated, "The sword, fool!"

He laid it in her hands and she looked at it, turning it over in the torchlight, studying the workmanship, the hilt with its single smoky jewel, the etched symbols on the blade.

"Where did you get this, Scyld?"

"I—" He stammered, not liking to make the admission, his hand going instinctively to his stolen collar.

Ywain snapped, "Your thieving doesn't interest me. Where did you get it?"

He pointed to Carse and Boghaz. "From them, Highness, when I picked them up."

She nodded. "Fetch them aft to my quarters."

She disappeared inside the cabin. Scyld, unhappy and completely bewildered, turned to obey her order and Boghaz moaned.

"Oh, merciful gods!" he whispered. "That's done it!" He leaned closer to Carse and said rapidly while he still had the chance, "Lie, as you never lied before! If she thinks you know the secret of the Tomb she or the Dhuvians will force it out of you!"

Carse said nothing. He was having all he could do to retain consciousness. Scyld called profanely for wine, which was brought. He forced some of it down Carse's throat, then had him and Boghaz released from the oar and marched up to the afterdeck.

The wine and the sea wind up on deck revived Carse enough so that he could keep his feet under him. Scyld ushered them ungently into Ywain's torchlit cabin, where she sat with the sword of Rhiannon laid on the carven table before her.

In the opposite bulkhead was a low door leading into an inner cabin. Carse saw that it was open the merest crack. No light showed but he got the feeling that someone—something—was crouching behind it, listening. It made him remember Jaxart's word and Shallah's.

THERE was a taint in the air—a faint musky odor, dry and sickly. It seemed to come from that inner cabin. It had a strange effect on Carse. Without knowing what it was he hated it.

He thought that if it was a lover Ywain

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was hiding in there it must be a strange sort of lover.

Ywain took his mind off that. Her gaze stabbed at him, and once again he thought that he had never seen such eyes. Then she said to Scyld, "Tell me—the full story."

Uncomfortably, in halting sentences, he told her. Ywain looked at Boghaz.

"And you, fat one. How did you come by the sword?"

Boghaz sighed, nodding at Carse. "From him, Highness. It's a handsome weapon and I'm a thief by trade."

"Is that the only reason you wanted it?"

Boghaz' face was a model of innocent surprise. "What other reason could there be? I'm no fighting man. Besides, there were the belt and collar. You can see for yourself, Highness, that all are valuable."

Her face did not show whether she believed him or not. She turned to Carse.

"The sword belonged to you, then?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"

"I bought it from a trader."

"Where?

"In the northern country, beyond Shun."

Ywain smiled. "You lie."

Carse said wearily, "I came by the weapon honestly"—he had, in a sense—"and I don't care whether you believe it or not."

The crack of that inner door mocked Carse. He wanted to break it open, to see what crouched there, listening, watching out of the darkness. He wanted to see what made that hateful smell.

Almost, it seemed, there was no need for that. Almost, it seemed, he knew.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Scyld burst out, "Your pardon, Highness! But why all this fuss about a sword?"

"You're a good soldier, Scyld," she answered thoughtfully, "but in many ways a blockhead. Did you clean this blade?"

"Of course. And bad condition it was in, too." He glanced disgustedly at Carse. "It looked as though he hadn't touched it for years."

Ywain reached out and laid her hand upon the jeweled hilt. Carse saw that it trembled. She said softly, "You were right, Scyld. It hadn't been touched, for years. Not since Rhiannon, who made it, was walled away in his tomb to suffer for his sins."

Scyld's face went completely blank. His jaw dropped. After a long while he said one word, *"Rhiannon!"*

CHAPTER VIII

The Thing in the Dark

YWAIN'S level gaze fastened on Carse. "He knows the secret of the Tomb, Scyld. He must know it if he had the sword."

She paused and when she spoke again her words were almost inaudible, like the voicing of an inner thought.

"A dangerous secret. So dangerous that I almost wish . . ."

She broke off short, as though she had already said too much. Did she glance quickly at the inner door?

In her old imperious tone she said to Carse, "One more chance, slave. Where is the Tomb of Rhiannon?"

Carse shook his head. "I know nothing," he said and gripped Boghaz' shoulder to steady himself. Little crimson droplets had trickled down to dye the rug under his feet. Ywain's face seemed far away.

Scyld said hoarsely, "Give him to me, Highness."

"No. He's too far gone for your methods now. I don't want him killed yet. I must—take thought to this."

She frowned, looking from Carse to Boghaz and back again.

"They object to rowing, I believe. Very well. Take the third man off their oar. Let these two work it without help all night. And tell Callus to lay the lash on the fat one twice in every glass, five strokes."

Boghaz wailed. "Highness, I implore you! I would tell if I could but I know nothing. I swear it!"

She shrugged. "Perhaps not. In that case you will wish to persuade your comrade to talk."

She turned again to Scyld. "Tell Callus also to douse the tall one with seawater, as often as he needs it." Her white teeth glinted. "It has a healing property."

Scyld laughed.

Ywain motioned him to go. "See that they're kept at it but on no account is either one to die. When they're ready to talk bring them to me."

Scyld saluted and marched his prisoners back again to the rowers' pit. Jaxart was taken off the oar and the endless nightmare

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of the dark hours continued for Carse.

Boghaz was crushed and trembling. He screamed mightily as he took his five strokes and then moaned in Carse's ear, "I wish I'd never seen your bloody sword! She'll take us to Caer Dhu—and the gods have mercy on us."

Carse bared his teeth in what might have been a grin. "You talked differently in Jekkara."

"I was a free man then and the Dhuvians were far away."

Carse felt some deep and buried nerve contract at the mention of that name. He said in an odd voice, "Boghaz, what was that smell in the cabin?"

"Smell? I noticed none."

"Strange," Carse thought, *"when it drove me nearly mad. Or perhaps I'm mad already."*

"Jaxart was right, Boghaz. There is someone hidden there, in the inner cabin."

With some irritation Boghaz said, "Ywain's wantoning is nothing to me."

They labored in silence for a while. Then Carse asked abruptly, "Who are the Dhuvians?"

Boghaz stared at him. "Where do you really come from, man?"

"As I told you—from far beyond Shun."

"It must have been from far indeed if you haven't heard of Caer Dhu and the Serpent!"

Then Boghaz shrugged fat shoulders as he labored. "You're playing some deep game of your own, I suppose. All this pretended ignorance—but I don't mind playing that game with you."

He went on, "You know at least that since long ago there have been human peoples on our world and also the not-quite-human peoples, the Halflings. Of the humans the great Quiru, who are gone, were the greatest. They had so much science and wisdom that they're still revered as superhuman.

"But there were also the Halflings—the races who are manlike but not descended of the same blood. The Swimmers, who sprang from the sea-creatures, and the Sky Folk, who came from the winged things—and the Dhuvians, who are from the serpent."

A COLD breath swept through Carse. Why was it that all this which he heard for the first time seemed so familiar to him?

Certainly he had never heard before this story of ancient Martian evolution, of intrinsically alien stocks evolving into superficially similar pseudo-human peoples. He had not heard it before—*or had he?*

"Crafty and wise as the snake that fathered them were the Dhuvians always," Boghaz was continuing. "So crafty that they prevailed on Rhiannon of the Quiru to teach them some of his science.

"Some but not all! Yet what they learned was enough that they could make their black city of Caer Dhu impregnable and could occasionally intervene with their scientific weapons so as to make their Sark allies the dominant human nation."

"And *that* was Rhiannon's sin?" Carse said.

"Aye, that was the Cursed One's sin for in his pride he had defied the other Quiru, who counseled him not to teach the Dhuvians such powers. For that sin the other Quiru condemned Rhiannon and entombed him in a hidden place before they left our world. At least so says the legend."

"But the Dhuvians themselves are no mere legend?"

"They are not, damn them," Boghaz muttered. "They are the reason all free men hate the Sarks, who hold evil alliance with the Serpent."

They were interrupted by the broken-winged slave, Lorn. He had been sent to dip up a bucket of seawater and now appeared with it.

The winged man spoke and even now his voice had music in it. "This will be painful, stranger. Bear it if you can—it will help you." He raised the bucket. Glowing water spilled out, covering Carse's body with a bright sheath.

Carse knew why Ywain had smiled. Whatever chemical gave the sea its phosphorescence might be healing but the cure was worse than the wounds. The corrosive agony seemed to eat the flesh from his bones.

The night wore on and after a while Carse felt the pain grow less. His weals no longer bled and the water began to refresh him. To his own surprise he saw the second dawn break over the White Sea.

Soon after sunrise a cry came down from the masthead. The Black Banks lay ahead.

Through the oar port Carse saw a welter of broken water that stretched for miles. Reefs and shoals, with here and there black jagged fangs of rock showing through the foam. "They're not going to try to run that mess?" he exclaimed.

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"It's the shortest route to Sark," Boghaz said. "As for running the Banks—why do you suppose every Sark galley carries captive Swimmers?"

"I've wondered."

"You'll soon see."

Ywain came on deck and Scyld joined her. They did not look down at the two haggard scarecrows sweating at the oar.

Boghaz instantly wailed piteously. "Mercy, Highness!"

Ywain paid no attention. She ordered Scyld, "Slow the beat and send the Swimmers out."

Naram and Shallah were unshackled and ran forward. Metal harnesses were locked to their bodies. Long wire lines ran from these harnesses to ringbolts in the forecastle deck.

The two Swimmers dived fearlessly into the foaming waters. The wire lines tautened and Carse glimpsed the heads of the two bobbing like corks as they swam smoothly ahead of the galley into the roaring Banks.

"You see?" said Boghaz. "They feel out the channel. They can guide a ship through anything."

To the slow beat of the drum the black galley forged into the broken water.

Ywain stood, hair flying in the breeze and hauberk shining, by the man at the tiller. She and Scyld peered closely ahead. The rough water shook along the keel with a hiss and a snarl and once an oar splintered on a rock but they crept on safely.

It was a long slow weary passage. The sun rose toward the zenith. There was an aching tension aboard the galley.

Carse only dimly heard the roar of breakers as he and Boghaz labored at their oar. The fat Valkisian was groaning ceaselessly now. Carse's arms felt like lead, his brain seemed clamped in steel.

At last the galley found smooth water, shot clear of the Banks. Their dull thunder came now from astern. The Swimmers were hauled back in.

Ywain glanced down into the oarpit for the first time, at the staggering slaves.

"Give them a brief rest," she rapped. "The wind should rise soon."

Her eyes swung to Carse and Boghaz. "And, Scyld, I'll see those two again now."

Carse watched Scyld cross the deck and come down the ladder. He felt a sick apprehension.

He did not want to go up to that cabin again. He did not want to see again that door with its mocking crack nor smell that sickly evil smell.

But he and Boghaz were again unshackled and herded aft, and there was nothing he could do.

The door swung shut behind them. Scyld, Ywain behind the carved table, the sword of Rhiannon gleaming before her. The tainted air and the low door in the bulkhead, not quite closed—not quite.

Ywain spoke. "You've had the first taste of what I can do to you. Do you want the second? Or will you tell me the location of Rhiannon's Tomb and what you found there?"

Carse answered tonelessly. "I told you before that I don't know."

He was not looking at Ywain. That inner door fascinated him, held his gaze. Somewhere, far at the back of his mind, something stirred and woke. A prescience, a hate, a horror that he could not understand.

But he understood well enough that this was the climax, the end. A deep shudder ran through him, an involuntary tightening of nerves.

"What is it that I do not know but can somehow almost remember?"

Ywain leaned forward. "You're strong. You pride yourself on that. You feel that you can stand physical punishment, perhaps more than I would dare to give you. I think you could. But there are other ways. Quicker, surer ways and even a strong man has no defense against them."

She followed the line of his gaze to the inner door. "Perhaps," she said softly, "you can guess what I mean."

Carse's face was empty now of all expression. The musky smell was heavy as smoke in his throat. He felt it coil and writhe inside him, filling his lungs, stealing into his blood. Poisonously subtle, cruel, cold with a primal coldness. He swayed on his feet but his fixed stare did not waver.

He said hoarsely, "I can guess."

"Good. Speak now and that door need not open."

Carse laughed, a low, harsh sound. His eyes were clouded and strange.

"Why should I speak? You would only destroy me later to keep the secret safe."

He stepped forward. He knew that he moved. He knew that he spoke though the sound of his own voice was vague in his ears.

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But there was a dark confusion in him. The veins of his temples stood out like knotted cords, and the blood throbbed in his brain. Pressure, as of something bursting, breaking its bonds, tearing itself free.

HE DID not know why he stepped forward, toward that door. He did not know why he cried out in a tone that was not his, *"Open then, Child of the Snake!"*

Boghaz let out a wailing shriek and crouched down in a corner, hiding his face. Ywain started up, astonished and suddenly pale. The door swung slowly back.

There was nothing behind it but darkness and a shadow. A shadow cloaked and hooded and so crouched in the lightless cabin that it was no more than the ghost of a shadow.

But it was there. And the man Carse, caught fast in the trap of his strange fate, recognized it for what it was.

It was fear, the ancient evil thing that crept among the grasses in the beginning, apart from life but watching it with eyes of cold wisdom, laughing its silent laughter, giving nothing but the bitter death.

It was the Serpent.

The primal ape in Carse wanted to run, to hide away. Every cell of his flesh recoiled, every instinct warned him.

But he did not run and there was an anger in him that grew until it blotted out the fear, blotted out Ywain and the others, everything but the wish to destroy utterly the creature crouching beyond the light.

His own anger—or something greater? Something born of a shame and an agony that he could never know?

A voice spoke to him out of the darkness, soft and sibilant.

"You have willed it. Let it be so."

There was utter silence in the cabin. Scyld had recoiled. Even Ywain had drawn back to the end of the table. The cowering Boghaz hardly breathed.

The shadow had stirred with a slight, dry rustle. A spot of subdued brilliance had appeared, held by unseen hands—a brilliance that shed no glow around it. It seemed to Carse like a ring of little stars, incredibly distant.

The stars began to move, to circle their hidden orbit, to spin faster and faster until they became a wheel, peculiarly blurred. From them now came a thin high note, a crystal song that was like infinity, without beginning and end.

A song, a call, attuned to his hearing alone? Or was it his hearing? He could not tell. Perhaps he heard it with his flesh instead, with every quivering nerve. The others, Ywain and Scyld and Boghaz, seemed unaffected.

Carse felt a coldness stealing over him. It was as though those tiny singing stars called to him across the universe, charming him out into the deeps of space where the empty cosmos sucked him dry of warmth and life.

His muscles loosened. He felt his sinews melt and flow away on the icy tide. He felt his brain dissolving.

He went slowly to his knees. The little stars sang on and on. He understood them now. They were asking him a question. He knew that when he answered he could sleep. He would not wake again but that did not matter. He was afraid now but if he slept he would forget his fear.

Fear—fear! The old, old racial terror that haunts the soul, the dread that slides in the quiet dark—

In sleep and death he could forget that fear. He need only answer that hypnotic whispered question.

"Where is the Tomb?"

Answer. Speak. But something still chained his tongue. The red flame of anger still flickered in him, fighting the brilliance of the singing stars.

He struggled but the star-song was too strong. He heard his dry lips slowly speaking. "The Tomb, the place of Rhiannon . . ."

"Rhiannon! Dark Father who taught you power, thou spawn of the serpent's egg!"

The name rang in him like a battle cry. His rage soared up. The smoky jewel in the hilt of the sword on the table seemed suddenly to call to his hand. He leaped and grasped its hilt.

Ywain sprang forward with a startled cry but was too late.

The great jewel seemed to blaze, to catch up the power of the singing, shining stars and hurl it back.

The crystal song keened and broke. The brilliance faded. He had shattered the strange hypnosis.

Blood flowed again into Carse's veins. The sword felt alive in his hands. He shouted the name Rhiannon and plunged forward into the dark.

He heard a hissing scream as his long blade went home to the heart of the shadow.

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CHAPTER IX

Galley of Death

CARSE straightened slowly and turned in the doorway, his back to the thing he had slain but had not seen. He had no wish to see it. He was utterly shaken and in a strange mood, full of a vaulting strength that verged on madness.

The hysteria, he thought, that comes when you've taken too much, when the walls close in and there's nothing to do but fight before you die.

The cabin was full of a stunned silence. Scyld had the staring look of an idiot, his mouth fallen open. Ywain had put one hand to the edge of the table and it was strange to see in her that one small sign of weakness. She had not taken her eyes from Carse.

She said huskily, "Are you man or demon that you can stand against Caer Dhu?"

Carse did not answer. He was beyond speech. Her face floated before him like a silver mask. He remembered the pain, the shameful labor at the sweep, the scars of the lash that he carried. He remembered the voice that had said to Callus, "Teach him!"

He had slain the Serpent. After that it seemed an easy thing to kill a queen.

He began to move, covering the few short steps that lay between them, and there was something terrible about the slow purposefulness of it, the galled and shackled slave carrying the great sword, its blade dark with alien blood.

Ywain gave back one step. Her hand faltered to her own hilt. She was not afraid of death. She was afraid of the thing that she saw in Carse, the light that blazed in his eyes. A fear of the soul and not the body.

Scyld gave a hoarse cry. He drew his sword and lunged.

They had all forgotten Boghaz, crouching quiet in his corner. Now the Valkisian rose to his feet, handling his great bulk with unbelievable speed. As Scyld passed him he raised both hands and brought the full weight of his gyves down with tremendous strength on the Sark's head.

Scyld dropped like a stone.

And now Ywain had found her pride again. The sword of Rhiannon rose high for the death stroke and quick, quick as lightning, she drew her own short blade and parried it as it fell.

The force of the blow drove her weapon out of her hands. Carse had only to strike again. But it seemed that with that effort something had gone out of him. He saw her mouth open to voice an angry shout for aid and he struck her across the face with his hilt reversed, so that she slid stunned to the deck, her cheek laid open.

And then Boghaz was thrusting him back, saying, "Don't kill her! We may buy our lives with hers!"

Carse watched as Boghaz bound and gagged her and took the dagger from her belt-sheath.

It occurred to him that they were two slaves who had overpowered Ywain of Sark and struck down her captain and that the lives of Matt Carse and Boghaz of Valkis were worth less than a puff of wind as soon as it was discovered.

[*Turn page*]

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So far, they were safe. There had been little noise and there were no sounds of alarm outside.

Boghaz shut the inner door as though to block off even the memory of what lay within. Then he took a closer look at Scyld, who was quite dead. He picked up the man's sword and stood still for a minute, catching his breath.

He was staring at Carse with a new respect that had in it both awe and fear. Glancing at the closed door, he muttered, "I would not have believed it possible. And yet I saw it." He turned back to Carse. "You cried out upon Rhiannon before you struck. Why?"

Carse said impatiently, "How can a man know what he's saying, at a time like that?"

The truth was that he didn't know himself why he had spoken the Cursed One's name, except that it had been thrust at him so often that he supposed it had become a sort of obsession. The Dhuvian's little hypnosis gadget had thrown his whole mind off balance for a while. He remembered only a towering anger—the gods knew he had had enough to make any man angry.

It was probably not so strange that the Dhuvian's hypnotic science hadn't been able to put him completely under. After all he was an Earthman and a product of another age. Even so it had been a near thing—horribly near. He didn't want to think about it any more.

"That's over now. Forget it. We've got to think how to get ourselves out of this mess."

BOGHAZ' courage seemed to have drained away. He said glumly, "We'd better kill ourselves at once and have done with it."

He meant it. Carse said, "If you feel that way why did you strike out to save my life?"

"I don't know. Instinct, I suppose."

"All right. My instinct is to go on living as long as possible."

It didn't look as though that would be very long. But he was not going to take Boghaz' advice and fall upon the sword of Rhiannon. He weighted it in his hands, scowling, and then looked from it to his fetters.

He said suddenly, "If we could free the rowers they'd fight. They're all condemned for life—nothing to lose. We might take the ship."

Boghaz' eyes widened, then narrowed shrewdly. He thought it over. Then he shrugged. "I suppose one can always die. It's worth trying. Anything's worth trying."

He tested the point of Ywain's dagger. It was thin and strong. With infinite skill, he began to pick the lock of the Earthman's gyves.

"Have you a plan?" he asked.

Carse grunted. "I'm no magician. I can only try." He glanced at Ywain. "You stay here, Boghaz. Barricade the door. Guard her. If things go wrong she's our last and only hope."

The cuffs hung loose now on his wrist and ankles. Reluctantly he laid down the sword. Boghaz would need the dagger to free himself but there was another one on Scyld's body. Carse took it and hid it under his kilt. As he did so he gave Boghaz a few brief instructions.

A moment later Carse opened the cabin door just widely enough to step outside. From behind him came a good enough imitation of Scyld's gruff voice, calling for a guard. A soldier came.

"Take this slave back to the oar-bank," ordered the voice that aped Scyld's. "And see that the lady Ywain is not disturbed."

The man saluted and began to herd the shuffling Carse away. The cabin door banged shut and Carse heard the sound of the bar dropping into place.

Across the deck, and down the ladder. *"Count the soldiers, think how it must be done!"*

No. Don't think. Don't, or you'll never try it.

The drummer, who was a slave himself. The two Swimmers. The overseer, up at the forward end of the catwalk, lashing a rower. Rows of shoulders, bending over the oars, back and forth. Rows of faces above them. The faces of rats, of jackals, of wolves. The creak and groan of the looms, the reek of sweat and bilgewater, the incessant beat, beat, beat of the drum.

The soldier turned Carse over to Callus and went away. Jaxart was back on the oar and with him a lean Sark convict with a brand on his face. They glanced up at Carse and then away again.

Callus thrust the Earthman roughly onto the bench, where he bent low over the oar. Callus stooped to fix the master chain to his leg-irons, growling as he did so.

"I hope that Ywain lets me have you

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when she's all through with you, carrion! I'll have fun while you last—"

Callus stopped very suddenly and said no more, then or ever. Carse had stabbed his heart with such swift neatness that not even Callus was aware of the stroke until he ceased to breathe.

"Keep stroke!" snarled Carse to Jaxart under his breath. The big Khond obeyed. A smoldering light came into his eyes. The branded man laughed once, silently, with a terrible eagerness.

Carse cut the key to the master locks free from its thong on Callus' girdle and let the corpse down gently into the bilges.

The man across the catwalk on the port oar had seen as had the drummer. "Keep stroke!" said Carse again and Jaxart glared and the stroke was kept. But the drum beat faltered and died.

Carse shook off his manacles. His eyes met the drummer's and the rhythm started again but already the overseer was on his way aft, shouting.

"What's the matter there, you pig?"

"My arms are weary," the man quavered.

"Weary, are they? I'll weary your back for you too if it happens again!"

The man on the port oar, a Khond, said deliberately, "Much is going to happen, you Sark scum." He took his hands off the oar.

The overseer advanced upon him. "Is it now? Why, the filth is a very prophet!"

His lash rose and fell once and then Carse was on him. One hand clamped the man's mouth shut and the other plunged the dagger in. Swiftly, silently, a second body rolled into the bilges.

A deep animal cry broke out along the oar-bank and was choked down as Carse raised his arms in a warning gesture, looking upward at the deck. No one had noticed, yet. There had been nothing to draw notice.

INEVITABLY, the rhythm of the oars had broken but that was not unusual and, in any case, it was the concern of the overseer. Unless it stopped altogether no one would wonder. If luck would only hold . . .

The drummer had the sense or the habit to keep on. Carse passed the word along—"Keep stroke, until we're all free!" The beat picked up again, slowly. Crouching low, Carse opened the master locks. The men needed no warning to be easy with their chains as they freed themselves, one by one.

Even so, less than half of them were loose when an idle soldier chose to lean on the deck rail and look down.

Carse had just finished releasing the Swimmers. He saw the man's expression change from boredom to incredulous awareness and he caught up the overseer's whip and sent the long lash singing upward. The soldier bellowed the alarm as the lash coiled around his neck and brought him crashing down into the pit.

Carse leaped to the ladder. "Come on, you scum, you rabble!" he shouted. "Here's your chance!"

And they were after him like one man, roaring the beast roar of creatures hungry for vengeance and blood. Up the ladder they poured, swinging their chains, and those that were still held to the benches worked like madmen to be free.

They had the brief advantage of surprise, for the attack had come so quickly on the heels of the alarm that swords were still half drawn, bows still unstrung. But it wouldn't last long. Carse knew well how short a time it would last.

"Strike! Strike hard while you can!"

With belaying pins, with their shackles, with their fists, the galley slaves charged in and the soldiers met them. Carse with his whip and his knife, Jaxart howling the word *Khondor* like a battle-cry, naked bodies against mail, desperation against discipline. The Swimmers slipped like brown shadows through the fray and the slave with the broken wings had somehow possessed himself of a sword. Seamen reinforced the soldiers but still the wolves came up out of the pit.

From the forecastle and the steersman's platform bowmen began to take their toll but the fight became so closely locked that they had to stop for fear of killing their own men. The salt-sweet smell of blood rose on the air. The decks were slippery with it. And gradually the superior force of the soldiery began to tell. Carse saw that the slaves were being driven back and the number of the dead was growing.

In a furious surge he broke through to the cabin. The Sarks must have thought it strange that Ywain and Scyld had not appeared but they had had little time to do anything about it. Carse pounded on the cabin door, shouting Boghaz' name.

The Valkisian drew the bar, and Carse burst in.

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"Carry the wench up to the steersman's platform," he panted. "I'll cut your way."

He snatched up the sword of Rhiannon and went out again with Boghaz behind him, bearing Ywain in his arms.

The ladder was only a short two paces from the door. The bowmen had come down to fight and there was no one up on the platform but the frightened Sark sailor who clung to the tiller bar. Carse, swinging the great sword, cleared the way and held the ladder foot while Boghaz climbed up and set Ywain on her feet where all could see her.

"Look you!" he bellowed. "We have Ywain!"

He did not need to tell them. The sight of her, bound and gagged in the hands of a slave, was like a blow to the soldiers and like a magic potion to the rebels. Two mingled sounds went up, a groan and a cheer.

Someone found Scyld's body and dragged it out on deck. Doubly leaderless now, the Sarks lost heart. The tide of battle turned then and the slaves took their advantage in both hands.

The sword of Rhiannon led them. It slashed the halliards that brought the dragon flag of Sark plunging down from the masthead. And under its blade the last Sark soldier died.

There was an abrupt cessation of sound and movement. The black galley drifted with the freshening wind. The sun was low on the horizon. Carse climbed wearily to the steersman's platform.

Ywain, still fast in Boghaz' grip, followed him, eyes full of hell-fire.

Carse went to the forward edge of the platform and stood leaning on the sword. The slaves, exhausted with fighting and drunk with victory, gathered on the deck below like a ring of panting wolves.

Jaxart came out from searching the cabins. He shook his dripping blade up at Ywain and shouted, "A fine lover she kept in her cabin! The spawn of Caer Dhu, the stinking Serpent!"

THERE was an instant reaction from the slaves. They were tense and bristling again at that name, afraid even in their numbers. Carse made his voice heard with difficulty.

"The thing is dead. Jaxart—will you cleanse the ship?"

Jaxart paused before he turned to obey. "How did you know it was dead?"

Carse said, "I killed it."

The men stared up at him as though he were something more than human. The awed muttering went around—"He slew the Serpent!"

With another man Jaxart returned to the cabin and brought the body out. No word was spoken. A wide lane was cleared to the lee rail and the black, shrouded thing was carried along it, faceless, formless, hidden in its robe and cowl, symbol even in death of infinite evil.

Again Carse fought down that cold repellent fear and the touch of strange anger. He forced himself to watch.

The splash it made as it fell was shockingly loud in the stillness. Ripples spread in little lines of fire and died away.

Then men began to talk again. They began to shout up to Ywain, taunting her. Someone yelled for her blood and there would have been a stampede up the ladder but that Carse threatened them with his long blade.

"No! She's our hostage and worth her weight in gold."

He did not specify how but he knew the argument would satisfy them for awhile. And much as he hated Ywain he somehow did not want to see her torn to pieces by this pack of wild beasts.

He steered their thoughts to another subject.

"We have to have a leader now. Whom will you choose?"

There was only one answer to that. They roared his name until it deafened him, and Carse felt a savage pleasure at the sound of it. After days of torment it was good to know he was a man again, even in an alien world.

When he could make himself heard he said, "All right. Now listen well. The Sarks will kill us by slow death for what we've done—*if* they catch us. So here's my plan. We'll join the free rovers, the Sea-Kings who lair at Khondor!"

To the last man they agreed and the name *Khondor* rang up into the sunset sky.

The Khonds among the slaves were like wild men. One of them stripped a length of yellow cloth from the tunic of a dead soldier, fashioned a banner out of it and ran it up in place of the dragon flag of Sark.

At Carse's request, Jaxart took over the handling of the galley and Boghaz carried

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Ywain down again and locked her in the cabin.

The men dispersed, eager to be rid of their shackles, eager to loot the bodies of clothes and weapons and to dip into the wine-casks. Only Naram and Shallah remained, looking up at Carse in the afterglow.

"Do you disagree?" he asked them.

Shallah's eyes glowed with the same eery light that he had seen in them before.

"You are a stranger," she said softly. "Stranger to us, stranger to our world. And I say again that I can sense a black shadow in you that makes me afraid, for you will cast it wherever you go."

She turned from him then and Naram said, "We go homeward now."

The two Swimmers poised for a moment on the rail. They were free now, free of their chains, and their bodies ached with the joy of it, stretching upward, supple, sure. Then they vanished overside.

After a moment Carse saw them again, rolling and plunging like dolphins, racing each other, calling to each other in their soft clear voices as they made the waves foam flame.

Deimos was already high. The afterglow was gone and Phobos came up swiftly out of the east. The sea turned glowing silver. The Swimmers went away toward the west, trailing their wakes of fire, a tracery of sparkling light that grew fainter and vanished altogether.

The black galley stood on for Khondor, her taut sails dark against the sky. And Carse remained as he was, standing on the platform, holding the sword of Rhiannon between his hands.

CHAPTER X

The Sea Kings

CARSE was leaning on the rail, watching the sea, when the Sky Folk came.

Time and distance had dropped behind the galley. Carse had rested. He wore a clean kilt, he was washed and shaven, his wounds were healing. He had regained his ornaments and the hilt of the long sword gleamed above his left shoulder.

Boghaz was beside him. Boghaz was always beside him. He pointed now to the western sky and said, "Look there."

Carse saw what he took to be a flight of birds in the distance. But they grew rapidly larger and presently he realized that they were men, or half-men, like the slave with the broken wings.

They were not slaves and their wings stretched wide, flashing in the sun. Their slim bodies, completely naked, gleamed like ivory. They were incredibly beautiful, arrowing down out of the blue.

They had a kinship with the Swimmers. The Swimmers were the perfect children of the sea and these were brother to wind and cloud and the clean immensity of the sky. It was as though some master hand had shaped them both out of their separate elements, moulding them in strength and grace that was freed from all the earth-bound clumsiness of men, dreams made into joyous flesh.

Jaxart, who was at the helm, called down to them. "Scouts from Khondor!"

Carse mounted to the platform. The men gathered on the deck to watch as the four Sky Folk came down in a soaring rush.

Carse glanced forward to the sheer of the prow. Lorn, the winged slave, had taken to brooding there by himself, speaking to no one. Now he stood erect and one of the four went to him.

The others came to rest on the platform, folding their bright wings with a whispering rustle.

They greeted Jaxart by name, looking curiously at the long black galley and the hard-bitten mongrel crew that sailed her and, above all, at Carse. There was something in their searching gaze that reminded the Earthman uncomfortably of Shallah.

"Our chief," Jaxart told them. "A barbarian from the back door of Mars but a man of his hands and no fool, either. The Swimmers will have told the tale, how he took the ship and Ywain of Sark together."

"Aye." They acknowledged Carse with grave courtesy.

The Earthman said, "Jaxart has told me that all who fight Sark may have freedom of Khondor. I claim that right."

"We will carry word to Rold, who heads the council of the Sea Kings."

The Khonds on deck began to shout their own messages then, the eager words of men who have been a long time away from home. The Sky Men answered in their clear sweet voices and presently darted away, their pin-

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ions beating up into the blue air, higher and higher, growing tiny in the distance.

Lorn remained standing in the bow, watching until there was nothing left but empty sky.

"We'll raise Khondor soon," said Jaxart and Carse turned to speak to him. Then some instinct made him look back, and he saw that Lorn was gone.

There was no sign of him in the water. He had gone overside without a sound and he must have sunk like a drowning bird, pulled down by the weight of his useless wings.

Jaxart growled, "It was his will and better so." He cursed the Sarks and Carse smiled an ugly smile.

"Take heart," he said, "we may thrash them yet. How is it that Khondor has held out when Jekkara and Valkis fell?"

"Because not even the scientific weapons of the Sarks' evil allies, the Dhuvians, can touch us there. You'll understand why when you see Khondor."

Before noon they sighted land, a rocky and forbidding coast. The cliffs rose sheer out of the sea and behind them forested mountains towered like a giant's wall. Here and there a narrow fiord sheltered a fishing village and an occasional lonely steading clung to the high pasture-land. Millions of sea birds nested on the rocks and the surf made a collar of white flame along the cliffs.

Carse sent Boghaz to the cabin for Ywain. She had remained there under guard and he had not seen her since the mutiny—except once.

It had been the first night after the mutiny. He had with Boghaz and Jaxart been examining the strange instruments that they had found in the inner cabin of the Dhuvian.

"These are Dhuvian weapons that only they know how to use," Boghaz had declared. "Now we know why Ywain had no escort ship. She needed none with a Dhuvian and his weapons aboard her galley."

Jaxart looked at the things with loathing and fear. "Science of the accursed Serpent! We should throw them after his body."

"No," Carse said, examining the things. "If it were possible to discover the way in which these devices operate—"

HE HAD soon found that it would not be possible without prolonged study. He knew science fairly well, yes. But it was the science of his own different world.

These instruments had been built out of a scientific knowledge alien in nearly every way to his own. The science of Rhiannon, of which these Dhuvian weapons represented but a small part!

Carse could recognize the little hypnosis machine that the Dhuvian had used upon him in the dark. A little metal wheel set with crystal stars, that revolved by a slight pressure of the fingers. And when he set it turning it whispered a singing note that so chilled his blood with memory that he hastily set the thing down.

The other Dhuvian instruments were even more incomprehensible. One consisted of a large lens surrounded by oddly asymmetrical crystal prisms. Another had a heavy metal base in which flat metal vibrators were mounted. He could only guess that these weapons exploited the laws of alien and subtle optical and sonic sciences.

"No man can understand the Dhuvian science," muttered Jaxart. "Not even the Sarks, who have alliance with the Serpent."

He stared at the instruments with the half-superstitious hatred of a non-scientific folk for mechanical weapons.

"But perhaps Ywain, who is daughter of Sark's king, might know," Carse speculated. "It's worth trying."

He went to the cabin where she was being guarded with that purpose in mind. Ywain sat there and she wore now the shackles he had worn.

He came in upon her suddenly, catching her as she sat with her head bowed and her shoulders bent in utter weariness. But at the sound of the door she straightened and watched him, level-eyed. He saw how white her face was and how the shadows lay in the hollows of the bones.

He did not speak for a long time. He had no pity for her. He looked at her, liking the taste of victory, liking the thought that he could do what he wanted with her.

When he asked her about the Dhuvian scientific weapons they had found Ywain laughed mirthlessly.

"You must me an ignorant barbarian indeed if you think the Dhuvians would instruct even me in their science. One of them came with me to overawe with those things the Jekkaran ruler, who was waxing rebellious. But S'San would not let me even touch those things."

Carse believed her. It accorded with what Jaxart had said, that the Dhuvians jealously

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guarded their scientific weapons from even their allies, the Sarks.

"Besides," Ywain said mockingly, "why should Dhuvian science interest you if you hold the key to the far greater science locked in Rhiannon's tomb?"

"I do hold that key and that secret," Carse told her and his answer took the mockery out of her face.

"What are you going to do with it?" she asked.

"On that," Carse said grimly, "my mind is clear. Whatever power that tomb gives me I'll use against Sark and Caer Dhu—and I hope it's enough to destroy you down to the last stone in your city!"

Ywain nodded. "Well answered. And now—what about me? Will you have me flogged and chained to an oar? Or will you kill me here?"

He shook his head slowly, answering her last question. "I could have let my wolves tear you if I had wished you killed now."

Her teeth showed briefly in what might have been a smile. "Small satisfaction in that. Not like doing it with one's own hands."

"I might have done that too, here in the cabin."

"And you tried, yet did not. Well then—what?"

Carse did not answer. It came to him that, whatever he might do to her, she would still mock him to the very end. There was the steel of pride in this woman.

He had marked her though. The gash on her cheek would heal and fade but never vanish. She would never forget him as long as she lived. He was glad he had marked her.

"No answer?" she mocked. "You're full of indecision for a conqueror."

Carse went around the table to her with a pantherish step. He still did not answer because he did not know. He only knew that he hated her as he had never hated anything in his life before. He bent over her, his face dead white, his hands open and hungry.

She reached up swiftly and found his throat. Her fingers were as strong as steel and the nails bit deep.

He caught her wrists and bent them away, the muscles of his arms standing out like ropes against her strength. She strove against him in silent fury and then suddenly she broke. Her lips parted as she strained for breath and Carse suddenly set his own lips against them.

There was no love, no tenderness in that kiss. It was a gesture of male contempt, brutal and full of hate. Yet for one strange moment then her sharp teeth had met in his lower lip and his mouth was full of blood and she was laughing.

"You barbarian swine," she whispered. "Now my brand is on you."

He stood looking at her. Then he reached out and caught her by the shoulders and the chair went over with a crash.

"Go ahead," she said, "if it pleases you."

He wanted to break her between his two hands. He wanted . . .

He thrust her from him and went out and he had not passed the door since.

NOW he fingered the new scar on his lip and watched her come onto the deck with Boghaz. She stood very straight in her jeweled hauberk but the lines around her mouth were deeper and her eyes, for all their bitter pride, were somber.

He did not go to her. She was left alone with her guard, and Carse could glance at her covertly. It was easy to guess what was in her mind. She was thinking how it felt to stand on the deck of her own ship, a prisoner. She was thinking that the brooding coast ahead was the end of all her voyaging. She was thinking that she was going to die.

The cry came down from the masthead—*"Khondor!"*

Carse saw at first only a great craggy rock that towered high above the surf, a sort of blunt cape between two fiords. Then, from that seemingly barren and uninhabitable place, Sky Folk came flying until the air throbbed with the beating of their wings. Swimmers came also, like a swarm of little comets that left trails of fire in the sea. And from the fiord-mouths came longships, smaller than the galley, swift as hornets, with shields along their sides.

The voyage was over. The black galley was escorted with cheers and shouting into Khondor.

Carse understood now what Jaxart had meant. Nature had made a virtually impregnable fortress out of the rock itself, walled in by impassible mountains from land attack, protected by unscalable cliffs from the sea, its only gateway the narrow twisting fiord on the north side. That too was guarded by ballistas which could make the fiord

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a death trap for any ship that entered it.

The tortuous channel widened at the end into a landlocked harbor that not even the winds could attack. Khond longships, fishing boats and a scattering of foreign craft filled the basin and the black galley glided like a queen among them.

The quays and the dizzy flight of steps that led up to the summit of the rock, connecting on the upper levels with tunneled galleries, were thronged with the people of Khondor and the allied clans that had taken refuge with them. They were a hardy lot with a raffish sturdy look that Carse liked. The cliffs and the mountain peaks flung back their cheering, in deafening echoes.

Under cover of the noise Boghaz said urgently to Carse for the hundredth time, "Let me bargain with them for the secret! I can get us each a kingdom—more, if you will!"

And for the hundredth time, Carse answered, "I have not said that I know the secret. If I do it is my own."

Boghaz swore in an ecstasy of frustration and demanded of the gods what he had done to be thus hardly used.

Ywain's eyes turned upon the Earthman once and then away.

Swimmers in their gleaming hundreds, Sky Folk with their proud wings folded—for the first time Carse saw their women, creatures so exquisitely lovely that it hurt to look at them—the tall fair Khonds and the foreign stocks, a kaleidoscope of colors and glinting steel. Mooring lines snaked out, were caught and snubbed around the bollards. The galley came to rest.

Carse led his crew ashore and Ywain walked erect beside him, wearing her shackles as though they were golden ornaments she had chosen to become her.

There was a group standing apart on the quay, waiting. A handful of hard-bitten men who looked as though seawater ran in their veins instead of blood, tough veterans of many battles, some fierce and dark-visaged, some with ruddy laughing faces, one with cheek and sword-arm hideously burned and scarred.

Among them was a tall Khond with a look of harnessed lightning about him and hair the color of new copper and by his side stood a girl dressed in a blue robe.

Her straight fair hair was bound back by a fillet of plain gold and between her breasts, left bare by the loose outer garment, a single black pearl glowed with lustrous darkness. Her left hand rested on the shoulder of Shallah the Swimmer.

Like all the rest the girl was paying more attention to Ywain than she was to Carse. He realized somewhat bitterly that the whole crowd had gathered less to see the unknown barbarian who had done it all than to see the daughter of Garach of Sark walking in chains.

The red-haired Khond remembered his manners enough to make the sign of peace and say, "I am Rold of Khondor. We, the Sea Kings, make you welcome."

Carse responded but saw that already he was half forgotten in the man's savage pleasure at the plight of his arch-enemy.

They had much to say to each other, Ywain and the Sea Kings.

Carse looked again at the girl. He had heard Jaxart's eager greeting to her and knew now that she was Emer, Rold's sister.

He had never seen anyone like her before. There was a touch of the fey, of the elfin, about her, as though she lived in the human world by courtesy and could leave it any time she chose.

Her eyes were gray and sad, but her mouth was gentle and shaped for laughter. Her body had the same quick grace he had noticed in the Halflings and yet it was a very humanly lovely body.

She had pride, too—pride to match Ywain's own though they were so different. Ywain was all brilliance and fire and passion, a rose with blood-red petals. Carse understood her. He could play her own game and beat her at it.

But he knew that he would never understand Emer. She was part of all the things he had left behind him long ago. She was the lost music and the forgotten dreams, the pity and the tenderness, the whole shadowy world he had glimpsed in childhood but never since.

ALL at once she looked up and saw him. Her eyes met his—met and held, and would not go away. He saw their expression change. He saw every drop of color drain from her face until it was like a mask of snow. He heard her say,

"Who are you?"

He bent his head. "Lady Emer, I am Carse the barbarian."

He saw how her fingers dug into Shallah's fur and he saw how the Swimmer watched

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him with her soft hostile gaze. Emer's voice answered, almost below the threshold of hearing.

"You have no name. You are as Shallah said—a stranger."

Something about the way she said the word made it seem full of an eery menace. And it was so uncannily close to the truth.

He sensed suddenly that this girl had the same extra-sensory power as the Halflings, developed in her human brain to even greater strength.

But he forced a laugh. "You must have many strangers in Khondor these days." He glanced at the Swimmer. "Shallah distrusts me, I don't know why. Did she tell you also that I carry a dark shadow with me wherever I go?"

"She did not need to tell me," Emer whispered. "You face is only a mask and behind it is a darkness and a wish—and they are not of our world."

She came to him with slow steps, as though drawn against her will. He could see the dew of sweat on her forehead and abruptly he began to tremble himself, a shivering deep within him that was not of the flesh.

"I can see . . . I can almost see . . ."

He did not want her to say any more. He did not want to hear it.

"No!" he cried out. *"No!"*

She suddenly fell forward, her body heavy against him. He caught her and eased her down to the gray rock, where she lay in a dead faint.

He knelt helplessly beside her but Shallah said quietly, "I will care for her." He stood up and then Rold and the Sea Kings were around them like a ring of startled eagles.

"The seeing was upon her," Shallah told them.

"But it has never taken her like this before," Rold said worriedly. "What happened? My thought was all on Ywain."

"What happened is between the lady Emer and the stranger," said Shallah. She picked up the girl in her strong arms and bore her away.

Carse felt that strange inner fear still chilling him. The "seeing" they had called it. Seeing indeed, not of any supernatural kind, but of strong extra-sensory powers that had looked deep into his mind.

In sudden reaction of anger Carse said, "A fine welcome! All of us brushed aside for a look at Ywain and then your sister faints at sight of me!"

"By the gods!" Rold groaned. "Your pardon—we had not meant it so. As for my sister, she is too much with the Halflings and given as they are to dreams of the mind."

He raised his voice. "Ho, there, Ironbeard! Let us redeem our manners!"

The largest of the Sea Kings, a grizzled giant with a laugh like the north wind, came forward and before Carse realized their intention they had tossed him onto their shoulders and marched with him up the quay where everyone could see him.

"Hark, you!" Rold bellowed. *"Hark!"*

The crowd quieted at his voice.

"Here is Carse, the barbarian. He took the galley—he captured Ywain—he slew the Serpent! How do you greet him?"

Their greeting nearly brought down the cliffs. The two big men bore Carse up the steps and would not put him down. The people of Khondor streamed after them, accepting the men of his crew as their brothers. Carse caught a glimpse of Boghaz, his face one vast porcine smile, holding a giggling girl in each arm.

Ywain walked alone in the center of a guard of the Sea Kings. The scarred man watched her with a brooding madness in his unwinking eyes.

Rold and Ironbeard dumped Carse to his feet at the summit, panting.

"You're a heavyweight, my friend," gasped Rold, grinning. "Now—does our penance satisfy you?"

Carse swore, feeling shamefaced. Then he stared in wonder at the city of Khondor.

A monolithic city, hewn in the rock itself. The crest had been split, apparently by diastrophic convulsions in the remoter ages of Mars. All along the inner cliffs of the split were doorways and the openings of galleries, a perfect honeycomb of dwellings and giddy flights of steps.

Those who had been too old or disabled to climb the long way down to the harbor cheered them now from the galleries or from the narrow streets and squares.

The sea wind blew keen and cold at this height, so that there was always a throb and a wail in the streets of Khondor, mingling with the booming voices of the waves below. From the upper crags there was a coming and going of the Sky Folk, who seemed to like the high places as though the streets cramped them. Their fledglings tossed on the wind, swooping and tumbling in their

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private games, with bursts of elfin laughter.

Landward Carse looked down upon green fields and pasture land, locked tight in the arms of the mountains. It seemed as though this place could withstand a siege forever.

They went along the rocky ways with the people of Khondor pouring after them, filling the eyrie-city with shouts and laughter. There was a large square, with two squat strong porticoes facing each other across it. One had carven pillars before it, dedicated to the God of Waters and the God of the Four Winds. Before the other a golden banner whipped, broidered with the eagle badge of Khondor.

At the threshold of the palace Ironbeard clapped the Earthman on the shoulder, a staggering buffet.

"There'll be heavy talk along with the feasting of the Council tonight. But we have plenty of time to get decently drunk before that. How say you?"

And Carse said, "Lead on!"

CHAPTER XI

Dread Accusation

THAT night torches lighted the banquet hall with a smoky glare. Fires burned on round hearths between the pillars, which were hung with shields and the ensigns of many ships. The whole vast room was hollowed out of the living rock with galleries that gave upon the sea.

Long tables were set out. Servants ran among them with flagons of wine and smoking joints fresh from the fires. Carse had nobly followed the lead of Ironbeard all afternoon and to his somewhat unsteady sight it seemed that all of Khondor was feasting there to the wild music of harps and the singing of the skalds.

He sat with the Sea Kings and the leaders of the Swimmers and the Sky Folk on the raised dais at the north end of the hall. Ywain was there also. They had made her stand and she had remained motionless for hours, giving no sign of weakness, her head still high. Carse admired her. He liked it in her that she was still the proud Ywain.

Around the curving wall had been set the figureheads of ships taken in war so that Carse felt surrounded by shadowy looming monsters that quivered on the brink of life, with the torchlight picking glints from a jeweled eye or a gilded talon, momentarily lighting a carven face half ripped away by a ram.

Emer was nowhere in the hall.

Carse's head rang with the wine and the talking and there was a mounting excitement in him. He fondled the hilt of the sword of Rhiannon where it lay between his knees. Presently, presently, it would be time.

Rold set his drinking-horn down with a bang.

"Now," he said, "let's get to business." He was a trifle thick-tongued, as they all were, but fully in command of himself. "And the business, my lords? Why, a very pleasant one." He laughed. "One we've thought on for a long time, all of us—the death of Ywain of Sark!"

Carse stiffened. He had been expecting that. "Wait! She's my captive."

They all cheered him at that and drank his health again, all except Thorn of Tarak, the man with the useless arm and the twisted cheek, who had sat silent all evening, drinking steadily but not getting drunk.

"Of course," said Rold. "Therefore the choice is yours." He turned to look at Ywain with pleasant speculation. "How shall she die?"

"Die?" Carse got to his feet. "What is this talk of Ywain dying?"

They stared at him rather stupidly, too astonished for the moment to believe that they had heard him right. Ywain smiled grimly.

"But why else did you bring her here?" demanded Ironbeard. "The sword is too clean a death or you would have slain her on the galley. Surely you gave her to us for our vengeance?"

"I have not given her to anyone!" Carse shouted. "I say she is mine and I say she is not to be killed!"

There was a stunned pause. Ywain's eyes met the Earthman's, bright with mockery. Then Thorn of Tarak said one word, *"Why?"*

He was looking straight at Carse now with his dark mad eyes and the Earthman found his question hard to answer.

"Because her life is worth too much, as a hostage. Are you babes, that you can't see that? Why, you could buy the release of every Khond slave—perhaps even bring Sark to terms!"

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Thorn laughed. It was not pleasant laughter.

The leader of the Swimmers said, "My people would not have it so."

"Nor mine," said the winged man.

"Nor mine!" Rold was on his feet now, flushed with anger. "You're an outlander, Carse. Perhaps you don't understand how things are with us!"

"No," said Thorn of Tarak softly. "Give her back. She, that learned kindness at Garach's knee, and drank wisdom from the teachers of Caer Dhu. Set her free again to mark others with her blessing as she marked me when she burned my longship." His eyes burned into the Earthman. "Let her live—because the barbarian loves her."

Carse stared at him. He knew vaguely that the Sea Kings tensed forward, watching him—the nine chiefs of war with the eyes of tigers, their hands already on their sword-hilts. He knew that Ywain's lips curved as though at some private jest. And he burst out laughing.

He roared with it. "Look you!" he cried, and turned his back so that they might see the scars of the lash. "Is that a love-note Ywain has written on my hide? And if it were—it was no song of passion the Dhuvian was singing me when I slew him!"

He swung round again, hot with wine, flushed with the power he knew he had over them.

"Let any man of you say that again and I'll take the head from his shoulders. Look at you. Great nidderings, quarreling over a wench's life! Why don't you gather, all of you, and make an assault on Sark!"

There was a great clatter and scraping of feet as they rose, howling at him in their rage at his impudence, bearded chins thrust forward, knotty fists hammering on the board.

"What do you take yourself for, you pup of the sandhills?" Rold shouted. "Have you never heard of the Dhuvians and their weapons, who are Sark's allies? How many Khonds do you think have died these long years past, trying to face those weapons?"

"But suppose," asked Carse, "you had weapons of your own?"

SOMETHING in his voice penetrated even to Rold, who scowled at him.

"If you have a meaning, speak it plainly!"

"Sark could not stand against you," Carse said, "if you had the weapons of Rhiannon."

Ironbeard snorted. "Oh, aye, the Cursed One! Find his Tomb and the powers in it and we'll follow you to Sark, fast enough."

"Then you have pledged yourselves," Carse said and held the sword aloft. "Look there! Look well—does any man among you know enough to recognize this blade?"

Thorn of Tarak reached out his one good hand and drew the sword closer that he might study it. Then his hand began to tremble. He looked up at the others and said in a strange awed voice, "It is the sword of Rhiannon."

A harsh sibilance of indrawn breath and then Carse spoke.

"There is my proof. I hold the secret of the Tomb."

Silence. Then a guttural sound from Ironbeard and after that, mounting, wild excitement that burst and spread like flame.

"He knows the secret! By the gods *he knows!*"

"Would you face the Dhuvian weapons if you had the greater powers of Rhiannon?" Carse asked.

There was such a crazy clamor of excitement that it took moments for Rold's voice to be heard. The tall Khond's face was half doubtful.

"Could we use Rhiannon's weapons of power if we had them? We can't even understand the Dhuvian weapons you captured in the galley."

"Give me time to study and test them and I'll solve the way of using Rhiannon's instruments of power," Carse replied confidently.

He was sure that he could. It would take time but he was sure that his own knowledge of science was sufficient to decipher the operation of at least some of those weapons of an alien science.

He swung the great sword high, glittering in the red light of the torches, and his voice rang out, "And if I arm you thus will you make good your word? Will you follow me to Sark?"

All doubts were swept away by the challenge, by the heaven-sent opportunity to strike at last at Sark on at least even terms.

The answer of the Sea Kings roared out. "We'll follow!"

It was then that Carse saw Emer. She had come onto the dais by some inner passage, standing now between two brooding giant figureheads crusted with the memory of the sea, and her eyes were fixed on Carse,

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wide and full of horror.

Something about her compelled them, even in that moment, to turn and stare. She stepped out into the open space above the table. She wore only a loose white robe and her hair was unbound. It was as though she had just risen from sleep and was walking still in the midst of a dream.

But it was an evil dream. The weight of it crushed her, so that her steps were slow and her breathing labored and even these fighting men felt the touch of it on their own hearts.

Emer spoke and her words were very clear and measured.

"I saw this before when the stranger first came before me, but my strength failed me and I could not speak. Now I shall tell you. You must destroy this man. He is danger, he is darkness, he is death for us all!"

Ywain stiffened, her eyes narrowing. Carse felt her glance on him, intense with interest. But his attention was all on Emer. As on the quay he was filled with a strange terror that had nothing to do with ordinary fear, an unexplainable dread of this girl's strong extra-sensory powers.

Rold broke in and Carse got a grip on himself. Fool, he thought, to be upset by woman's talk, woman's imaginings . . .

"—the secret of the Tomb!" Rold was saying. "Did you not hear? He can give us the power of Rhiannon!"

"Aye," said Emer sombrely. "I heard and I believe. He knows well the hidden place of the Tomb and he knows the weapons that are there."

She moved closer, looking up at Carse where he stood in the torchlight, the sword in his hands. She spoke now directly to him.

"Why should you not know, who have brooded there so long in the darkness? Why should you not know, who made those powers of evil with your own hands?"

Was it the heat and the wine that made the rock walls reel and put the cold sickness in his belly? He tried to speak and only a hoarse sound came, without words. Emer's voice went on, relentless, terrible.

"Why should you not know—you who are the Cursed One, Rhiannon!"

The rock walls gave back the word like a whispered curse, until the hall was filled with the ghostly name *Rhiannon!* It seemed to Carse that the very shields rang with it and the banners trembled. And still the girl stood unmoving, challenging him to speak, and his tongue was dead and dry in his mouth.

They stared at him, all of them—Ywain and the Sea Kings and the feasters silent amid the spilled wine and the forgotten banquet.

It was as though he were Lucifer fallen, crowned with all the wickedness of the world.

Then Ywain laughed, a sound with an odd note of triumph in it. "So that is why! I see it now—why you called upon the Cursed One in the cabin there, when you stood against the power of Caer Dhu that no man can resist, and slew S'San."

HER voice rang out mockingly. "Hail, Lord Rhiannon!"

That broke the spell. Carse said, "You lying vixen. You salve your pride with that. No mere man could down Ywain of Sark but a god—that's different."

He shouted at them all. "Are you fools or children that you listen to such madness? You, there, Jaxart—you toiled beside me at the oar. Does a god bleed under the lash like a common slave?"

Jaxart said slowly, "That first night in the galley I heard you cry Rhiannon's name."

Carse swore. He rounded on the Sea Kings. "You're warriors, not serving-maids. Use your wits. Has my body mouldered in a tomb for ages? Am I a dead thing walking?"

Out of the tail of his eyes he saw Boghaz moving toward the dais and here and there the drunken devils of the galley's crew were rising also, loosening their swords, to rally to him.

Rold put his hands on Emer's shoulders and said sternly, "What say you to this, my sister?"

"I have not spoken of the body," Emer answered, "only of the mind. The mind of the mighty Cursed One could live on and on. It did live and now it has somehow entered into this barbarian, dwelling there as a snail lies curled within its shell."

She turned again to Carse. "In yourself you are alien and strange and for that alone I would fear you because I do not understand. But for that alone I would not wish you dead. But I say that Rhiannon watches through your eyes and speaks with your tongue, that in your hands are his sword and sceptre. And therefore I ask your death."

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Carse said harshly, "Will you listen to this crazy child?"

But he saw the deep doubt in their faces. The superstitious fools! There was real danger here.

Carse looked at his gathering men, figuring his chances of fighting clear if he had to. He mentally cursed the yellow-haired witch who had spoken this incredible, impossible madness.

Madness, yes. And yet the quivering fear in his own heart had crystallized into a single stabbing shaft.

"If I were possessed," he snarled, "would I not be the first to know?"

"Would I not?" echoed the question in Carse's brain. And memories came rushing back—the nightmare darkness of the Tomb, where he had seemed to feel an eager alien presence, and the dreams and the half-remembered knowledge that was not his own.

It was not true. It could not be true. He would not let it be true.

Boghaz came up onto the dais. He gave Carse one queer shrewd glance but when he spoke to the Sea Kings his manner was smoothly diplomatic.

"No doubt the Lady Emer has wisdom far beyond mine and I mean her no disrespect. However, the barbarian is my friend and I speak from my own knowledge. He is what he says, no more and no less."

The men of the galley crew growled a warning assent to that.

Boghaz continued. "Consider, my lords. Would Rhiannon slay a Dhuvian and make war on the Sarks? Would he offer victory to Khondor?"

"No!" said Ironbeard. "By the gods, he wouldn't. He was all for the Serpent's spawn."

Emer spoke, demanding their attention. "My lords, have I ever lied or advised you wrongly?"

They shook their heads and Rold said, "No. But your word is not enough in this."

"Very well, forget my word. There is a way to prove whether or not he is Rhiannon. Let him pass the testing before the Wise Ones."

Rold pulled at his beard, scowling. Then he nodded. "Wisely said," he agreed and the others joined in.

"Aye—let it be proved."

Rold turned to Carse. "You will submit?"

"No," Carse answered furiously. "I will not. To the devil with all such superstitious flummery! If my offer of the Tomb isn't enough to convince you of where I stand—why, you can do without it and without me."

Rold's face hardened. "No harm will come to you. If you're not Rhiannon you have nothing to fear. Again, will you submit?"

"No!"

He began to stride back along the table toward his men, who were already bunched together like wolves snarling for a fight. But Thorn of Tarak caught his ankle as he passed and brought him down and the men of Khondor swarmed over the galley's crew, disarming them before any blood was shed.

Carse struggled like a wildcat among the Sea Kings, in a brief passion of fury that lasted until Ironbeard struck him regretfully on the head with a brass-bound drinking horn.

CHAPTER XII

The Cursed One

THE darkness lifted slowly. Carse was conscious first of sounds—the suck and sigh of water close at hand, the muffled roaring of surf beyond a wall of rock. Otherwise it was still and heavy.

Light came next, a suffused soft glow. When he opened his eyes he saw high above him a rift of stars and below that was arching rock, crusted with crystalline deposits that gave back a gentle gleaming.

He was in a sea cave, a grotto floored with a pool of milky flame. As his sight cleared he saw that there was a ledge on the opposite side of the pool, with steps leading down from above. The Sea Kings stood there with shackled Ywain and Boghaz and the chief men of the Swimmers and the Sky Folk. All watched him and none spoke.

Carse found that he was bound upright to a thin spire of rock, quite alone.

Emer stood before him, waist deep in the pool. The black pearl gleamed between her breasts, and the bright water ran like a spilling of diamonds from her hair. In her hands she held a great rough jewel, dull gray in color and cloudy as though it slept.

When she saw that his eyes were open she said clearly, "Come, oh my masters! It is time."

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A regretful sigh murmured through the grotto. The surface of the pool was disturbed with a trembling of phosphorescence and the waters parted smoothly as three shapes swam slowly to Emer's side. They were the heads of three Swimmers, white with age.

Their eyes were the most awful things that Carse had ever seen. For they were young with an alien sort of youth that was not of the body and in them was a wisdom and a strength that frightened him.

He strained against his bonds, still half dazed from Ironbeard's blow, and he heard above him a rustling as of great birds roused from slumber.

Looking up he saw on the shadowy ledges three brooding figures, the old, old eagles of the Sky Folk with tired wings, and in their faces too was the light of wisdom divorced from flesh.

He found his tongue, then. He raged and struggled to be free and his voice had a hollow empty sound in the quiet vault and they did not answer and his bonds were tight.

He realized at last that it was no use. He leaned, breathless and shaken, against the spire of rock.

A harsh cracked whisper came then from the ledge above. "Little sister—lift up the stone of thought."

Emer raised the cloudy jewel in her hands.

It was an eery thing to watch. Carse did not understand at first. Then he saw that as the eyes of Emer and the Wise Ones grew dim and veiled the cloudy gray of the jewel cleared and brightened.

It seemed that all the power of their minds was pouring into the focal point of the crystal, blending through it into one strong beam. And he felt the pressure of those gathered minds upon his own mind!

Carse sensed dimly what they were doing. The thoughts of the conscious mind were a tiny electric pulsation through the neurones. That electric pulse could be dampened, neutralized, by a stronger counter-impulse such as they were focusing on him through that electro-sensitive crystal.

They themselves could not know the basic science behind their attack upon his mind! These Halflings, strong in extra-sensory powers, had perhaps long ago discovered that the crystals could focus their minds together and had used the discovery without ever knowing its scientific basis.

"But I can hold them off," Carse whispered thickly to himself. "I can hold them all off!"

It enraged him, that calm impersonal beating down of his mind. He fought it with all the force within him but it was not enough.

And then, as before when he had faced the singing stars of the Dhuvian, some force in him that did not seem his own came to aid him.

It built a barrier against the Wise Ones and held it, held it until Carse moaned in agony. Sweat ran down his face and his body writhed and he knew dimly that he was going to die, that he couldn't stand any more.

His mind was like a closed room that is suddenly burst open by contending winds that turn over the piled-up memories and shake the dusty dreams and reveal everything, even in the darkest corners.

All except one. One place where the shadow was solid and impenetrable, and would not be dispersed.

The jewel blazed between Emer's hands. And there was a stillness like the silence in the spaces between the stars.

Emer's voice rang clear across it.

"Rhiannon, *speak*!"

The dark shadow that Carse felt laired in his mind quivered, stirred but gave no other sign. He felt that it waited and watched.

The silence pulsed. Across the pool, the watchers on the ledge moved uneasily.

BOGHAZ' voice came querulously. "It is madness! How can this barbarian be the Cursed One of long ago?"

But Emer paid no heed and the jewel in her hands blazed higher and higher.

"The Wise Ones have strength, Rhiannon! They can break this man's mind. They *will* break it unless you speak!"

And, savagely triumphant now, "What will you do then? Creep into another man's brain and body? You cannot, Rhiannon! For you would have done so ere now if you could!"

Across the pool Ironbeard said hoarsely, "I do not like this!"

But Emer went mercilessly on and now her voice seemed the only thing in Carse's universe—relentless, terrible.

"The man's mind is cracking, Rhiannon. A minute more—a minute more and your only instrument becomes a helpless idiot. Speak now, if you would save him!"

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Her voice rang and echoed from the vaulting rock of the cavern and the jewel in her hands was a living flame of force.

Carse felt the agony that convulsed that crouching shadow in his mind—agony of doubt, of fear—

And then suddenly that dark shadow seemed to explode through all Carse's brain and body, to possess him utterly in every atom. And he heard his own voice, alien in tone and timbre, shouting, *"Let the man's mind live! I will speak!"*

The thunderous echoes of that terrible cry died slowly and in the pregnant hush that followed Emer gave back one step and then another, as though her very flesh recoiled.

The jewel in her hands dimmed suddenly. Fiery ripples broke and fled as the Swimmers shrank away and the wings of the Sky Folk clashed against the rock. In the eyes of all of them was the light of realization and of fear.

From the rigid figures that watched across the water, from Rold and the Sea Kings, came a shivering sigh that was a name.

"Rhiannon! The Cursed One!"

It came to Carse that even Emer, who had dared to force into the open the hidden thing she had sensed in his mind, was afraid of the thing now that she had evoked it.

And he, Matthew Carse, was afraid. He had known fear before. But even the terror he had felt when he faced the Dhuvian was as nothing to this blind shuddering agony.

Dreams, illusions, the figments of an obsessed mind—he had tried to believe that that was what these hints of strangeness were. But not now. Not now! He knew the truth and it was a terrible thing to know.

"It proves nothing!" Boghaz was wailing insistently. "You have hypnotized him, made him admit the impossible."

"It is Rhiannon," whispered one of the Swimmers. She raised her white-furred shoulders from the water, her ancient hands lifted. "It is Rhiannon in the stranger's body."

And then, in a chilling cry, "Kill the man before the Cursed One uses him to destroy us all!"

A hellish clamor broke instantly from the echoing walls as an ancient dread screamed from human and Halfling throats.

"Kill him! Kill!"

Carse, helpless himself but one in feeling with the dark thing within him, felt that dark one's wild anxiety. He heard the ringing voice that was not his own shouting out above the clamor.

"Wait! You are afraid because I am Rhiannon! But I have not come back to harm you!"

"Why have you come back then?" whispered Emer.

She was looking into Carse's face. And by her dilated eyes Carse knew that his face must be strange and awful to look upon.

Through Carse's lips, Rhiannon answered, "I have come to redeem my sin—I swear it!"

Emer's white, shaken face flashed burning hate. "Oh, father of lies! Rhiannon, who brought evil on our world by giving the Serpent power, who was condemned and punished for his crime—Rhiannon, the Cursed One, turned saint!"

She laughed, a bitter laughter born of hate and fear, that was picked up by the Swimmers and the Sky Folk.

"For your own sake you must believe me!" raged the voice of Rhiannon. "Will you not even listen?"

Carse felt the passion of the dark being who had used him in this unholy fashion. He was one with that alien heart that was violent and bitter and yet lonely—lonely as no other could understand the word.

"Listen to Rhiannon?" cried Emer. "Did the Quiru listen long ago? They judged you for your sin!"

"Will you deny me the chance to redeem myself?" The Cursed One's tone was almost pleading. "Can you not understand that this man Carse is my only chance to undo what I did?"

His voice rushed on, urgent, eager. "For an age, I lay fixed and frozen in an imprisonment that not even the pride of Rhiannon could withstand. I realized my sin. I wished only to undo it but could not.

"Then into my tomb and prison from outside came this man Carse. I fitted the immaterial electric web of my mind into his brain. I could not dominate him, for his brain was alien and different. But I could influence him a little and I thought that I could act through him.

"For *his* body was not bound in that place. In him my mind at least could leave it. And in him I left it, not daring to let even him know that I was within his brain.

"I thought that through him I might find a way to crush the Serpent whom I raised from the dust to my sorrow long ago."

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Rold's shaking voice cut across the passionate pleading that came from Carse's lips. There was a wild look on the Khond's face.

"Emer, let the Cursed One speak no longer! Lift the spell of your minds from the man!"

"Lift the spell!" echoed Ironbeard hoarsely.

"Yes," whispered Emer. "Yes."

ONCE again the jewel was raised and now the Wise Ones gathered all their strength, spurred by the terror that was on them. The electro-sensitive crystal blazed and it seemed to Carse like bale-fire searing his mind. For Rhiannon fought against it, fought with the desperation of madness.

"You must listen! You must believe!"

"No!" said Emer. "Be silent! Release the man or he will die!"

One last wild protest, broken short by the iron purpose of the Wise Ones. A moment of hesitation—a stab of pain too deep for human understanding—and then the barrier was gone.

The alien presence, the unholy sharing of the flesh, were gone and the mind of Matthew Carse closed over the shadow and hid it. The voice of Rhiannon was stilled.

Like a dead man Carse sagged against his bonds. The light went out of the crystal. Emer let her hands fall. Her head bent forward so that her bright hair veiled her face and the Wise Ones covered their faces also and remained motionless. The Sea Kings, Ywain, even Boghaz, were held speechless, like men who have narrowly escaped destruction and only realize later how close death has come.

Carse moaned once. For a long time that and his harsh gasping breathing were the only sounds.

Then Emer said, "The man must die."

There was nothing in her now but weariness and a grim truth. Carse heard dimly Rold's heavy answer.

"Aye. There is no other way."

Boghaz would have spoken but they silenced him.

Carse said thickly, "It isn't true. Such things can't be."

Emer raised her head and looked at him. Her attitude had changed. She seemed now to have no fear of Carse himself, only pity for him.

"Yet you know that it is true."

Carse was silent. He knew.

"You have done no wrong, stranger," she said. "In your mind I saw many things that are strange to me, much that I cannot understand, but there was no evil there. Yet Rhiannon lives in you and we dare not let him live."

"But he can't control me!" Carse made an effort to stand, lifting his head so that he should be heard, for his voice was drained of strength like his body.

"You heard him admit that himself. He cannot dominate me. My will is my own."

Ywain said slowly, "What of S'San, and the sword? It was not the mind of Carse the barbarian that controlled you then."

"He cannot master you," said Emer, "except when the barriers of your own mind weaken under stress. Great fear or pain or weariness—perhaps even the unconsciousness of sleep or wine—might give the Cursed One his chance and then it would be too late."

Rold said, "We dare not take the risk."

"But I can give you the secret of Rhiannon's Tomb!" cried Carse.

He saw that thought begin to work in their minds and he went on, the ghastly unfairness of the whole thing acting as a spur.

"Do you call this justice, you men of Khondor who cry out against the Sarks? Will you condemn me when you know I'm innocent? Are you such cowards that you'll doom your people to live forever under the dragon's claws because of a shadow out of the past?

"Let me lead you to the Tomb. Let me give you victory. That will prove I have no part with Rhiannon!"

Boghaz' mouth fell open in horror. "No, Carse, no! Don't *give* it to them!"

Rold shouted, "Silence!"

Ironbeard laughed grimly. "Let the Cursed One lay hands upon his weapons? That would be madness indeed!"

"Very well," said Carse. "Let Rold go. I'll map the way for him. Keep me here. Guard me. That should be safe enough. You can kill me swiftly if Rhiannon takes control of me."

He caught them with that. The only thing greater than their hate and dread of the Cursed One was their burning desire for the legendary weapons of power that might in time mean victory and freedom for Khondor.

They pondered, doubtful, hesitating. But

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he knew their decision even before Rold turned and said, "We accept, Carse. It would be safer to slay you out of hand but—we need those weapons."

Carse felt the cold presence of imminent death withdraw a little. He warned, "It won't be easy. The Tomb is near Jekkara."

Ironbeard asked, "What of Ywain?"

"Death and at once!" said Thorn of Tarak harshly.

Ywain stood silent, looking at them all with cool, careless unconcern.

But Emer interposed. "Rold goes into danger. Until he returns safely let Ywain be kept in case we need a hostage for him."

It was only now that Carse saw Boghaz in the shadows, shaking his head in misery, tears running down his fat cheeks.

"He *gives* them a secret worth a kingdom!" wailed Boghaz. "I have been robbed!"

CHAPTER XIII

Catastrophe

THE days that followed after that were long strange days for Matthew Carse. He drew a map from memory of the hills above Jekkara and the place of the Tomb and Rold studied it until he knew it as he knew his own courtyard. Then the parchment was burned.

Rold took one longship and a picked crew, and left Khondor by night. Jaxart went with him. Everyone knew the dangers of that voyage. But one swift ship, with Swimmers to scout the way, might elude the Sark patrols. They would beach in a hidden cove Jaxart knew of, west of Jekkara, and go the rest of the way overland.

"If aught goes wrong on the return," Rold said grimly, "we'll sink our ship at once."

After the longship sailed there was nothing to do but wait.

Carse was never alone. He was given three small rooms in a disused part of the palace and guards were with him always.

A corroding fear crept in his mind, no matter how he fought it down. He caught himself listening for an inner voice to speak, watching for some small sign or gesture that was not his own. The horror of the ordeal in the place of the Wise Ones had left its mark. He knew now. And, knowing, he could never for one moment forget.

It was not fear of death that oppressed him, though he was human and did not want to die. It was dread of living again through that moment when he had ceased to be himself, when his mind and body were possessed in every cell by the invader. Worse than the dread of madness was the uncanny fear of Rhiannon's domination.

Emer came again and again to talk with him and study him. He knew she was watching him for signs of Rhiannon's resurgence. But as long as she smiled he knew that he was safe.

She would not look into his mind again. But she referred once to what she had seen there.

"You come from another world," she said with quiet sureness. "I think I knew that when first I saw you. The memories of it were in your mind—a desolate, desert place, very strange and sad."

They were on his tiny balcony, high under the crest of the rock, and the wind blew clean and strong down from the green forests.

Carse nodded. "A bitter world. But it had its own beauty."

"There is beauty even in death," said Emer, "but I am glad to be alive."

"Let's forget that other place, then. Tell me of this one that lives so strongly. Rold said you were much with the Halflings."

She laughed. "He chides me sometimes, saying that I am a changeling and not human at all."

"You don't look human now," Carse told her, "with the moonlight on your face and your hair all tangled with it."

"Sometimes I wish it were true. You have never been to the Isles of the Sky Folk?"

"No."

"They're like castles rising from the sea, almost as tall as Khondor. When the Sky Folk take me there I feel the lack of wings, for I must be carried or remain on the ground while they soar and swoop around me. It seems to me then that flying is the most beautiful thing in the world and I weep because I can never know it.

"But when I go with the Swimmers I am happier. My body is much like theirs though never quite so fleet. And it is wonderful—oh, wonderful—to plunge down into the glowing water and see the gardens that they

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keep, with the strange sea-flowers bowing to the tide and the little bright fish darting like birds among them.

"And their cities, silver bubbles in the shallow ocean. The heavens there are all glowing fire, bright gold when the sun shines, silver at night. It is always warm and the air is still and there are little ponds where the babies play, learning to be strong for the open sea.

"I have learned much from the Halflings," she finished.

"But the Dhuvians are Halflings too?" Carse said.

Emer shivered. "The Dhuvians are the oldest of the Halfling races. There are but few of them now and those all dwell at Caer Dhu."

Carse asked suddenly, "You have Hafling wisdom—is there no way to be rid of the monstrous thing within me?"

She answered somberly, "Not even the Wise Ones have learned that much."

The Earthman's fists closed savagely on the rock of the gallery.

"It would have been better if you'd killed me there in the cave!"

Emer put her gentle hand on his and said, "There is always time for death."

AFTER she left him Carse paced the floor for hours, wanting the release of wine and not daring to take it, afraid to sleep. When exhaustion took him at last, his guards strapped him to his bed and one stood by with a drawn sword and watched, ready to wake him instantly if he should seem to dream.

And he did dream. Sometimes they were nothing more than nightmares born of his own anguish, and sometimes the dark whisper of an alien voice came gliding into his mind, saying, *"Do not be afraid. Let me speak, for I must tell you."*

Many times Carse awoke with the echo of his screaming in his ears, and the sword's point at his throat.

"I mean no harm or evil. I can stop your fears if you will only listen!"

Carse wondered which he would do first—go mad or fling himself from the balcony into the sea.

Boghaz clung closer to him than ever. He seemed fascinated by the thing that lurked in Carse. He was awed too but not too much awed to be furious over the disposal of the Tomb.

"I told you to let me bargain for it!" he would say. "The greatest source of power on Mars and you give it away! *Give* it without even exacting a promise that they won't kill you when they get it."

His fat hands made a gesture of finality. "I repeat, you have robbed me, Carse. Robbed me of my kingdom."

And Carse, for once, was glad of the Valkisian's effrontery because it kept him from being alone. Boghaz would sit, drinking enormous quantities of wine, and every so often he would look at Carse and chuckle.

"People always said that I had a devil in me. But you, Carse—you have *the* devil in you!"

"Let me speak, Carse, and I will make you understand!"

Carse grew gaunt and hollow-eyed. His face twitched and his hands were unsteady.

Then the news came, brought by a winged man who flew exhausted into Khondor.

It was Emer who told Carse what had happened. She did not really need to. The moment he saw her face, white as death, he knew.

"Rold never reached the Tomb," she said. "A Sark patrol caught them on the outward voyage. They say Rold tried to slay himself to keep the secret safe but he was prevented. They have taken him to Sark."

"But the Sarks don't even know that he has the secret," Carse protested, clutching at that straw, and Emer shook her head.

"They're not fools. They'll want to know the plans of Khondor and why he was bound toward Jekkara with a single ship. They'll have the Dhuvians question him."

Carse realized sickly what that meant. The Dhuvians' hypnotic science had almost conquered his own stubbornly alien brain. It would soon suck all Rold's secrets out of him.

"Then there is no hope?"

"No hope," said Emer. "Not now nor ever again."

They were silent for awhile. The wind moaned in the gallery, and the waves rolled in solemn thunder against the cliffs below.

Carse said, "What will be done now?"

"The Sea Kings have sent word through all the free coasts and isles. Every ship and every man is gathering here now and Ironbeard will lead them on to Sark.

"There is a little time. Even when the Dhuvians have the secret it will take them time to go to the Tomb and bring the

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weapons back and learn their use. If we can crush Sark before then . . ."

"*Can* you crush Sark?" asked Carse.

She answered honestly. "No. The Dhuvians will intervene and even the weapons they already have will turn the scale against us.

"But we must try and die trying, for it will be a better death than the one that will come after when Sark and the Serpent level Khondor into the sea."

He stood looking down at her and it seemed to him that no moment of his life had been more bitter than this.

"Will the Sea Kings take me with them?"

Stupid question. He knew the answer before she gave it to him.

"They are saying now that this was all a trick of Rhiannon's, misleading Rold to get the secret into Caer Dhu. I have told them it was not so but—"

She made a small tired gesture and turned her head away. "Ironbeard, I think, believes me. He will see that your death is swift and clean."

After awhile Carse said, "And Ywain?"

"Thorn of Tarak has arranged that. Her they will take with them to Sark, lashed to the bow of the leader's ship."

There was another silence. It seemed to Carse that the very air was heavy, so that it weighed upon his heart.

He found that Emer had left silently. He turned and went out onto the little gallery, where he stood staring down at the sea.

"Rhiannon," he whispered, "I curse you. I curse the night I saw your sword and I curse the day I came to Khondor with the promise of your tomb."

THE light was fading. The sea was like a bath of blood in the sunset. The wind brought him broken shouts and cries from the city and far below longships raced into the fiord.

Carse laughed mirthlessly. "You've got what you wanted," he told the Presence within him, "but you won't enjoy it long!"

Small triumph.

The strain of the past few days and this final shock were too much for any man to take. Carse sat down on the carven bench and put his head between his hands and stayed that way, too weary even for emotion.

The voice of the dark invader whispered in his brain and for the first time Carse was too numb to fight it down.

"I might have saved you this if you had listened. Fools and children, all of you, that you would not listen!"

"Very well then—speak," Carse muttered heavily. "The evil is done now and Ironbeard will be here soon. I give you leave, Rhiannon. Speak."

And he did, flooding Carse's mind with the voice of thought, raging like a storm wind trapped in a narrow vault, desperate, pleading.

"If you'll trust me, Carse, I could still save Khondor. Lend me your body, let me use it—"

"I'm not far gone enough for that, even now."

"Gods above!" Rhiannon's thought raged. *"And there's so little time—"*

Carse could sense how he fought to master his fury and when the thought-voice came again it was controlled and quiet with a terrible sincerity.

"I told the truth in the grotto. You were in my Tomb, Carse. How long do you think I could lie there alone in the dreadful darkness outside space and time and not be changed? I'm no god! Whatever you may call us now we Quiru were never gods—only a race of men who came before the other men.

"They call me evil, the Cursed One—but I was not! Vain and proud, yes, and a fool, but not wicked in intent. I taught the Serpent Folk because they were clever and flattered me—and when they used my teaching to work evil I tried to stop them and failed because they had learned defenses from me and even my power could not reach them in Caer Dhu.

"Therefore my brother Quiru judged me. They condemned me to remain imprisoned beyond space and time, in the place which they prepared, as long as the fruits of my sin endured on this world. Then they left me.

"We were the last of our race. There was nothing to hold them here, nothing they could do. They wanted only peace and learning. So they went away along the path they had chosen. And I waited. Can you think what that waiting must have been?"

"I think you deserved it," Carse said thickly. He was suddenly tense. The shadow, the beginning of a hope . . .

Rhiannon went on. *"I did. But you gave me the chance to undo my sin, to be free to follow my brothers."*

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The thought-voice rose with a passion that was strong, dangerously strong.

"Lend me your body, Carse! Lend me your body, that I may do it!"

"No!" cried Carse. *"No!"*

He sprang up, conscious now of his peril, fighting with all his strength against that wild demanding force. He thrust it back, closing his mind against it.

"You cannot master me," he whispered. "You cannot!"

"No," sighed Rhiannon bitterly, *"I cannot."*

And the inner voice was gone.

Carse leaned against the rock, sweating and shaken but fired by a last, desperate hope. No more than an idea, really, but enough to spur him on. Better anything than this waiting for death like a mouse in a trap.

If the gods of chance would only give him a little time . . .

From inside he heard the opening of the door and the challenge of the guards, and his heart sank. He stood breathless, listening for the voice of Ironbeard.

CHAPTER XIV

Daring Deception

BUT it was not Ironbeard who spoke. It was Boghaz, it was Boghaz alone who came out onto the balcony, very downcast and sad.

"Emer sent me," he said. "She told me the tragic news and I had to come to say good-by."

He took Carse's hand. "The Sea Kings are holding their last council of war before starting for Sark but it will not be long. Old friend, we have been through much together. You have grown to be like my own brother and this parting wrings my heart."

The fat Valkisian seemed genuinely affected. There were tears in his eyes as he looked at Carse.

"Yes, like my own brother," he repeated unsteadily. "Like brothers, we have quarreled but we have shed blood together too. A man does not forget."

He drew a long sigh. "I should like to have something of yours to keep by me, friend. Some small trinket for memory's sake. Your jeweled collar, perhaps—your belt—you will not miss them now and I should cherish them all the days of my life."

He wiped a tear away and Carse took him not too gently by the throat.

"You hypocritical scoundrel!" he snarled into the Valkisian's startled ear. "A small trinket, eh? By the gods, for a moment you had me fooled!"

"But, my friend—" squeaked Boghaz.

Carse shook him once and let him go. In a rapid undertone he said, "I'm not going to break your heart yet if I can help it. Listen, Boghaz. How would you like to gain back the power of the Tomb?"

Boghaz' mouth fell open. "Mad," he whispered. "The poor fellow's lost his wits from shock."

Carse glanced inside. The guards were lounging out of earshot. They had no reason to care what went on on the balcony. There were three of them, mailed and armed. Boghaz was weaponless as a matter of course and Carse could not possibly escape unless he grew wings.

Swiftly the Earthman spoke.

"This venture of the Sea Kings is hopeless. The Dhuvians will help Sark and Khondor will be doomed. And that means you too, Boghaz. The Sarks will come and if you survive their attack, which is doubtful, they'll flay you alive and give what's left of you to the Dhuvians."

Boghaz thought about that and it was not a pleasant thought.

"But," he stammered, "to regain Rhiannon's weapons now—it's impossible! Even if you could escape from here no man alive could get into Sark and snatch them from under Garach's nose!"

"No man," said Carse. "But I'm not just a man, remember? And whose weapons were they to begin with?"

Realization began to dawn in the Valkisian's eyes. A great light broke over his moon face. He almost shouted and caught himself with Carse's hand already over his mouth.

"I salute you, Carse!" he whispered. "The Father of Lies himself could not do better." He was beside himself with ecstasy. "It is sublime. It is worthy of—of Boghaz!"

Then he sobered and shook his head. "But it is also sheer insanity."

Carse took him by the shoulders. "As it was before on the galley—nothing to lose, all to gain. Will you stand by me?"

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The Valkisian closed his eyes. "I am tempted," he murmured. "As a craftsman, as an artist, I would like to see the flowering of this beautiful deceit."

He shivered all over. "Flayed alive, you say. And then the Dhuvians. I suppose you're right. We're dead men anyway." His eyes popped open. "Hold on there! For Rhiannon all might be well in Sark but I'm only Boghaz, who mutinied against Ywain. Oh, no! I'm better off in Khondor."

"Stay, then, if you think so." Carse shook him. "You fat fool! I'll protect you. As Rhiannon I can do that. And as the saviours of Khondor, with those weapons in our hands, there's no end to what we can do. How would you like to be King of Valkis?"

"Well—" Boghaz sighed. "You would tempt the devil himself. And speaking of devils—" He looked narrowly at Carse. "Can you keep yours down? It's an unchancy thing to have a demon for a bunkmate."

Carse said, "I can keep him down. You heard Rhiannon himself admit it."

"Then," said Boghaz, "we'd best move quickly before the Sea Kings end their council." He chuckled. "Old Ironbeard has helped us, ironically enough. Every man is ordered to duty and our crew is aboard the galley, waiting—and not very happy about it either!"

A moment later the guards in the inner room heard a piercing cry from Boghaz.

"Help! Come quickly—Carse has thrown himself into the sea!"

They rushed onto the balcony, where Boghaz was leaning out, pointing down to the churning waves below.

"I tried to hold him," he wailed, "but I could not."

One of the guards grunted. "Small loss," he said and then Carse stepped out of the shadows against the wall and struck him a sledgehammer blow that felled him and Boghaz whirled around to lay a second man on his back.

The third one they knocked down between them before he could get his sword clear of the scabbard. The other two were climbing to their feet again with some idea of going on with the fight but Carse and the Valkisian had no time to waste and knew it. Fists hammered stunning blows with brutal accuracy and within a few minutes the three unconscious men were safely bound and gagged.

Carse started to take the sword from one of them and Boghaz coughed with some embarrassment.

"Perhaps you'll want your own blade back," he said.

"Where is it?"

"Fortunately, just outside, where they made me leave it."

Carse nodded. It would be good to have the sword of Rhiannon in his hands again.

CROSSING the room Carse stopped long enough to pick up a cloak belonging to one of the guards. He looked sidelong at Boghaz. "How did you so fortunately chance to have my sword?" he asked.

"Why, being your best friend and second in command, I claimed it." The Valkisian smiled tenderly. "You were about to die—and I knew you would want me to have it."

"Boghaz," said Carse, "your love for me is a beautiful thing."

"I have always been sentimental by nature." The Valkisian motioned him aside, at the door. "Let me go first."

He stepped out in the corridor, then nodded and Carse followed him. The long blade stood against the wall. He picked it up and smiled.

"From now on," he said, "remember. I am Rhiannon!"

There was little traffic in this part of the palace. The halls were dark, lighted at infrequent intervals by torches. Boghaz chuckled.

"I know my way around this place," he said. "In fact I have found ways in and out that even the Khonds have forgotten."

"Good," said Carse. "You lead then. We go first to find Ywain."

"Ywain!" Boghaz stared at him. "Are you crazy, Carse? This is no time to be toying with that vixen!"

Carse snarled. "She must be with us to bear witness in Sark that I am Rhiannon. Otherwise the whole scheme will fail. Now will you go?"

He had realized that Ywain was the keystone of his whole desperate gamble. His trump card was the fact that she had *seen* Rhiannon possess him.

"There is truth in what you say," Boghaz admitted, then added dismally, "But I like it not. First a devil, then a hellcat with poison on her claws—this is surely a voyage for madmen!"

Ywain was imprisoned on the same upper level. Boghaz led the way swiftly and they met no one. Presently, around the bend

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where two corridors met, Carse saw a single torch burning by a barred door that had one small opening in its upper half. A sleepy guard drowsed there over his spear.

Boghaz drew a long breath. "Ywain can convince the Sarks," he whispered, "but can you convince her?"

"I must," Carse answered grimly.

"Well then—I wish us luck!"

According to the plan they had made on the way Boghaz sauntered ahead to talk to the guard, who was glad to have news of what was going on. Then, in the middle of a sentence, Boghaz allowed his voice to trail off. Open-mouthed, he stared over the guard's shoulder

The startled man swung around.

Carse came down the corridor. He strode as though he owned the world, the cloak thrown back from his shoulders, his tawny head erect, his eyes flashing. The wavering torchlight struck fire from his jewels and the sword of Rhiannon was a shaft of wicked silver in his hand.

He spoke in the ringing tones he remembered from the grotto.

"Down on your face, you scum of Khondor—unless you wish to die!"

The man stood transfixed, his spear half raised. Behind him Boghaz uttered a frightened whimper.

"By the gods," he moaned, "the devil has possessed him again. It is Rhiannon, broken free!"

Very godlike in the brazen light, Carse raised the sword, not as a weapon but as a talisman of power. He allowed himself to smile.

"So you know me. It is well." He bent his gaze on the white-faced guard. "Do *you* doubt, that I must teach you?"

"No," the guard answered hoarsely. "No, Lord!"

He went to his knees. The spear-point clashed on rock as he dropped it. Then he bellied down and hid his face in his hands.

Boghaz whimpered again, "Lord Rhiannon."

"Bind him," said Carse, "and open me this door."

It was done. Boghaz lifted the three heavy bars from their sockets. The door swung inward and Carse stood upon the threshold.

She was waiting, standing tensely erect in the gloom. They had not given her so much as a candle and the tiny cell was closed except for the barred slot in the door. The air was stale and dank with a taint of mouldy straw from the pallet that was the only furniture. And she wore her fetters still.

Carse steeled himself. He wondered whether, in the hidden depths of his mind, the Cursed One watched. Almost, he thought, he heard the echo of dark laughter, mocking the man who played at being a god.

Ywain said, "Are you indeed Rhiannon?"

Marshal the deep proud voice, the look of brooding fire in the glance.

"You have known me before," said Carse. "How say you now?"

He waited, while her eyes searched him in the half light. And then slowly her head bent, stiffly as became Ywain of Sark even before Rhiannon.

"Lord," she said.

Carse laughed shortly and turned to the cringing Boghaz.

"Wrap her in the cloths from the pallet. You must carry her—and bear her gently, swine!"

Boghaz scurried to obey. Ywain was obviously furious at the indignity but she held her tongue on that score.

"We are escaping then?" she asked.

"We are leaving Khondor to its fate." Carse gripped the sword. "I would be in Sark when the Sea Kings come that I may blast them myself, with my own weapons!"

Boghaz covered her face with the rags. Her hauberk and the hampering chains were hidden. The Valkisian lifted what might have been only a dirty bundle to his massive shoulder. And over the bundle he gave Carse a beaming wink.

Carse himself was not so sure. In this moment, grasping at the chance for freedom, Ywain would not be too critical. But it was a long way to Sark.

Had he detected in her manner just the faintest note of mockery when she bent her head?

CHAPTER XV

Under the Two Moons

BOGHAZ, with the true instinct of his breed, had learned every rathole in Khondor. He took them out of the palace by a way so long disused that the dust lay inches thick and the postern door had almost

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rotted away. Then, by crumbling stairways and steep alleys that were no more than cracks in the rock, he led the way around the city.

Khondor seethed. The night wind carried echoes of hastening feet and taut voices. The upper air was full of beating wings where the Sky Folk went, dark against the stars.

There was no panic. But Carse could feel the anger of the city, and the hard grim tension of a people about to strike back against certain doom. From the distant temple he could hear the voices of women chanting to the gods.

The hurrying people they met paid them little heed. It was only a fat sailor with a bundle and a tall man muffled in a cloak, going down toward the harbor. What matter for notice in that?

They climbed the long, long steps downward to the basin and there was much coming and going on the dizzy way, but still they passed unchallenged. Each Khond was too full of his own worries this fateful night to pay attention to his neighbor.

Nevertheless Carse's heart was pounding and his ears ached from listening for the alarm which would surely come as soon as Ironbeard went up to slay his captive.

They gained the quays. Carse saw the tall mast of the galley towering above the longships and made for it with Boghaz panting at his heels.

Torches burned here by the hundreds. By their light fighting men and supplies were pouring aboard the longships. The rock walls rang with the tumult. Small craft darted between the outer moorings.

Carse kept his head lowered, shouldering his way through the crowd. The water was alive with Swimmers and there were women with set white faces who had come to bid their men farewell.

As they neared the galley Carse let Boghaz get ahead of him. He paused in the shelter of a pile of casks, pretending to bind up his sandal thong while the Valkisian went aboard with his burden. He heard the crew, sullen-faced and nervous, hailing Boghaz and asking for news.

Boghaz disposed of Ywain by dumping her casually in the cabin, and then called all hands forward for a conference by the wine-butt, which was locked in the lazarette there. The Valkisian had his speech by heart.

"News?" Carse heard him say. "I'll give you news! Since Rold was taken there's an ugly temper in the city. We were their brothers yesterday. Today we're outlaws and enemies again. I've heard them talking in the wine-shops and I tell you our lives aren't worth *that!*"

While the crew was muttering uneasily over that Carse darted over the side unseen. Before he gained the cabin he heard Boghaz finish.

"There was a mob already gathering when I left. If we want to save our hides we'd better cast off now while we have the chance!"

Carse had been pretty sure what the reaction of the crew would be to that story and he was not sure at all that Boghaz was stretching it too much. He had seen mobs turn before and his crew of convict Sarks, Jekkarans and others might soon be in a nasty spot.

Now, with the cabin door closed and barred, he leaned against the panel, listening. He heard the padding of bare feet on the deck, the quick shouting of orders, the rattle of the blocks as the sails came down from the yards. The mooring lines were cast off. The sweeps came out with a ragged rumble. The galley rode free.

"Ironbeard's orders!" Boghaz shouted to someone on shore. "A mission for Khondor!"

The galley quivered, then began to gather way with the measured booming of the drum. And then, over all the near confusion of sound, Carse heard what his ears had been straining to hear—the distant roar from the crest of the rock, the alarm sweeping through the city, rushing toward the harbor stair.

He stood in an agony of fear lest everyone else should hear it too and know its meaning without being told. But the din of the harbor covered it long enough and by the time word had been brought down from the crest the black galley was already in the roadstead, speeding down into the mouth of the fiord.

In the darkness of the cabin Ywain spoke quietly. "Lord Rhiannon—may I be allowed to breathe?"

He knelt and stripped the cloths from her and she sat up.

"My thanks. Well, we are free of the palace and the harbor but there still remains the fiord. I heard the outcry."

"Aye," said Carse. "And the Sky Folk will carry word ahead." He laughed. "Let us see if they can stop Rhiannon by flinging

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pebbles from the cliffs!"

He left her then, ordering her to remain where she was, and went out on deck.

THEY were well along the channel now, racing under a fast stroke. The sails were beginning to catch the wind that blew between the cliffs. He tried to remember how the ballista defenses were set, counting on the fact that they were meant to bear on ships coming into the fiord, not going out.

Speed would be the main thing. If they could drive the galley fast enough they'd have a chance.

In the faint light of Deimos no one saw him. Not until Phobos topped the cliffs and sent a shaft of greenish light. Then the men saw him there, his cloak whipping in the wind, the long sword in his hands.

A strange sort of cry went up—half welcome for the Carse they remembered, half fear because of what they had heard about him in Kondor.

He didn't give them time to think. Swinging the sword high, he roared at them, "Pull, there, you apes! Pull, or they'll sink us!"

Man or devil, they knew he spoke the truth. They pulled.

Carse leaped up to the steersman's platform. Boghaz was already there. He cowered convincingly against the rail as Carse approached but the man at the tiller regarded him with wolfish eyes in which there was an ugly spark. It was the man with the branded cheek, who had been at the oar with Jaxart on the day of the mutiny.

"I'm captain now," he said to Carse. "I'll not have you on my ship to curse it!"

Carse said with terrible slowness, "I see you do not know me. Tell him, man of Valkis!"

But there was no need for Boghaz to speak. There came a whistling of pinions down the wind and a winged man stooped low in the moonlight over the ship.

"Turn back! Turn back!" he cried. "You bear—*Rhiannon!*"

"Aye!" Carse shouted back. "Rhiannon's wrath, Rhiannon's power!"

He lifted the sword hilt high so that the dark jewel blazed evilly in Phobos' light.

"Will you stand against me? Will you dare?"

The Skyman swerved away and rose wailing in the wind. Carse turned upon the steersman.

"And you," he said. "How say you now?"

He saw the wolf-eyes flicker from the blazing jewel to his own face and back again. The look of terror he was beginning to know too well came into them and they dropped.

"I dare not stand against Rhiannon," the man said hoarsely.

"Give me the helm," said Carse and the other stood aside, the brand showing livid on his whitened cheek.

"Make speed," Carse ordered, "if you would live."

And speed they made, so that the galley went with a frightening rush between the cliffs, a black and ghostly ship between the white fire of the fiord and the cold green moonlight. Carse saw the open sea ahead and steeled himself, praying.

A whining snarl echoed from the rock as the first of the great ballistas crashed. A spout of water rose by the galley's bow and she shuddered and raced on.

Crouched over the tiller bar, his cloak streaming, his face intense and strange in the eery glow, Carse ran the gauntlet in the throat of the fiord.

Ballistas twanged and thundered. Great stones rained into the water, so that they sailed through a burning cloud of mist and spray. But it was as Carse had hoped. The defenses, invincible to frontal attack, were weak when taken in reverse. The bracketing of the channel was imperfect, the aim poor against a fleeing target. Those things and the headlong speed of the galley saved them.

They came out into open water. The last stone fell far astern and they were free. There would be quick pursuit—that he knew. But for the moment they were safe.

Carse realized then the difficulties of being a god. He wanted to sit down on the deck and take a long pull at the wine cask to get over his shakes. But instead he had to force a ringing laugh, as though it amused him to see these childish humans try to prevail against the invincible.

"Here, you who call yourself captain! Take the helm—and set a course for Sark."

"Sark!" The unlucky man had much to contend with that night. "My Lord Rhiannon, have pity! We are proscribed convicts in Sark!"

"Rhiannon will protect you," Boghaz said.

"*Silence!*" roared Carse. "Who are you to speak for Rhiannon?" Boghaz cringed abjectedly and Carse said, "Fetch the Lady Ywain to me—but first strike off her chains."

He descended the ladder to stand upon

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the deck, waiting. Behind him he heard the branded man groan and mutter, *"Ywain!* Gods above, the Khonds would have been a better death!"

Carse stood unmoving and the men watched him, not daring to speak, wanting to rise and kill him, but afraid. Afraid of the unknown, shivering at the power of the Cursed One that could blast them all.

YWAIN came to him, free of her chains now, and bowed. He turned and called out to the crew.

"You rose against her once, following the barbarian. Now the barbarian is no more as you knew him. And you will serve Ywain again. Serve her well and she will forget your crime."

He saw her eyes blaze at that. She started to protest and he gave her a look that stopped the words in her throat.

"Pledge them," he commanded. "On the honor of Sark."

She obeyed. But it seemed to Carse again that she was still not quite convinced that he was actually Rhiannon.

She followed him to the cabin and asked if she might enter. He gave her leave and sent Boghaz after wine and then for a time there was silence. Carse sat brooding in Ywain's chair, trying to still the nervous pounding of his heart and she watched him from under lowered lids.

The wine was brought. Boghaz hesitated and then perforce left them alone.

"Sit down," said Carse, "and drink."

Ywain pulled up a low stool and sat with her long legs thrust out before her, slender as a boy in her black mail. She drank and said nothing.

Carse said abruptly, "You doubt me still."

She started. "No, Lord!"

Carse laughed. "Don't think to lie to me. A stiff-necked, haughty wench you are, Ywain, and clever. An excellent prince for Sark despite your sex."

Her mouth twisted rather bitterly. "My father Garach fashioned me as I am. A weakling with no son—someone had to carry the sword while he toyed with the sceptre."

"I think," said Carse, "that you have not altogether hated it."

She smiled. "No. I was never bred for silken cushions." She continued suddenly, "But let us have no more talk of my doubting, Lord Rhiannon. I have known you before—once in this cabin when you faced S'San and again in the place of the Wise Ones. I know you now."

"It does not greatly matter whether you doubt or not, Ywain. The barbarian alone overcame you and I think Rhiannon would have no trouble."

She flushed an angry red. Her lingering suspicion of him was plain now—her anger with him betrayed it.

"The barbarian did not overcome me! He kissed me and I let him enjoy that kiss so that I could leave the mark of it on his face forever!"

Carse nodded, goading her. "And for a moment you enjoyed it also. You're a woman, Ywain, for all your short tunic and your mail. And a woman always knows the one man who can master her."

"You think so?" she whispered.

She had come close to him now, her red lips parted as they had been before—tempting, deliberately provocative.

"I know it," he said.

"If you were merely the barbarian and nothing else," she murmured, "I might know it also."

The trap was almost undisguised. Carse waited until the tense silence had gone flat. Then he said coldly, "Very likely you would. However I am not the barbarian now, but Rhiannon. And it is time you slept."

He watched her with grim amusement as she drew away, disconcerted and perhaps for the first time in her life completely at a loss. He knew that he had dispelled her lingering doubt about him for the time being at least.

He said, "You may have the inner cabin."

"Yes, Lord," she answered and now there was no mockery in her tone.

She turned and crossed the cabin slowly. She pushed open the inner door and then halted, her hand on the doorpost, and he saw an expression of loathing come into her face.

"Why do you hesitate?" he asked.

"The place still reeks of the serpent taint," she said. "I had rather sleep on deck."

"Those are strange words, Ywain. S'San was your counselor, your friend. I was forced to slay him to save the barbarian's life—but surely Ywain of Sark has no dislike of her allies!"

"Not my allies—Garach's." She turned and faced him and he saw that her anger over her discomfiture had made her forget caution.

"Rhiannon or no Rhiannon," she cried, "I will say what has been in my mind to say

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all these years. I hate your crawling pupils of Caer Dhu! I loathe them utterly—and now you may slay me if you will!"

And she strode out onto the deck, letting the door slam shut behind her.

Carse sat still behind the table. He was trembling all over with nervous strain and presently he would pour wine to aid him. But just now he was amazed to find how happy it could make him to know that Ywain too hated Caer Dhu.

The wind had dropped by midnight and for hours the galley forged on under oars, moving at far less than her normal speed because they were short-handed in the rowers' pit, having lost the Khonds that made up the full number.

And at dawn the lookout sighted four tiny specks on the horizon that were the hulls of longships, coming on from Khondor.

CHAPTER XVI

Voice of the Serpent

CARSE stood on the afterdeck with Boghaz. It was mid-morning. The calm still held and now the longships were close enough to be seen from the deck.

Boghaz said, "At this rate they'll overhaul us by nightfall."

"Yes." Carse was worried. Undermanned as she was the galley could not hope to outdistance the Khonds under oars alone. And the last thing Carse wanted was to be forced into the position of fighting Ironbeard's men. He knew he couldn't do it.

"They'll break their hearts to catch us," he said. "And these are only the van. The whole of the Sea Kings' fleet will be coming on behind them."

Boghaz looked at the following ships. "Do you think we'll ever reach Sark?"

"Not unless we raise a fair wind," Carse said grimly, "and even then not by much of a margin. Do you know any prayers?"

"I was well instructed in my youth," answered Boghaz piously.

"Then pray!"

But all that long hot day there was no more than a breath of air to ripple the galley's sails. The men wearied at the sweeps. They had not much heart for the business at best, being trapped between two evils with a demon for captain, and they had only so much strength.

The longships doggedly, steadily, grew closer.

In the late afternoon, when the setting sun made a magnifying glass of the lower air the lookout reported other ships far back in the distance. Many ships—the armada of the Sea Kings.

Carse looked up into the empty sky, bitter of heart.

The breeze began to strengthen. As the sails filled the rowers roused themselves and pulled with renewed vigor. Presently Carse ordered the sweeps in. The wind blew strongly. The galley picked up speed and the longships could no more than hold their own.

Carse knew the galley's speed. She was a fast sailer and with her greater spread of canvas might hope to keep well ahead of the pursuers if the wind held.

If the wind held . . .

The next few days were enough to drive a man mad. Carse drove the men in the pit without mercy and each time the sweeps had to be run out the beat grew slower as they reached the point of exhaustion.

By the narrowest margin Carse kept the galley ahead. Once, when it seemed they were surely caught, a sudden storm saved them by scattering the lighter ships, but they came on again. And now a man could see the horizon dotted with a host of sails, where the armada irresistibly advanced.

The immediate pursuers grew from four to five, and then to seven. Carse remembered the old adage that a stern chase is a long one but it seemed that this one could not go on much longer.

There came another time of flat hot calm. The rowers drooped and sweated at the oars, driven only by their fear of the Khonds and try as they would there was no bite in the stroke.

Carse stood by the after rail, watching, his face lined and grim. The game was up. The lean longships were putting on a burst of speed, closing in for the kill.

Suddenly, sharply, there came a hail from the masthead.

"Sail ho!"

Carse whirled, following the line of the lookout's pointing arm.

"Sark ships!"

He saw them ahead, racing up under a fast beat, three tall war-galleys of the patrol.

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Leaping to the edge of the rowers' pit, he shouted to the men.

"Pull, you dogs! Lay into it! There's help on the way!"

They found their last reserves of energy. The galley made a desperate lurching run. Ywain came to Carse's side.

"We're close to Sark now, Lord Rhiannon. If we can keep ahead a little longer . . ."

The Khonds rushed down on them, pushing furiously in a last attempt to ram and sink the galley before the Sarks could reach them. But they were too late.

The patrol ships swept by. They charged in among the Khonds and scattered them and the air was filled with shouts and the twanging of bowstrings, and the terrible ripping sound of splintering oars as a whole bank was crushed into matchwood.

There began a running fight that lasted all afternoon. The desperate Khonds hung on and would not be driven off. The Sark ships closed in around the galley, a mobile wall of defence. Time and again the Khonds attacked, their light swift craft darting in hornet-like, and were driven off. The Sarks carried ballistas, and Carse saw two of the Khond ships holed and sunk by the hurtling stones.

A light breeze began to blow. The galley picked up speed. And now blazing arrows flew, searching out the bellying sails. Two of the escort ships fell back with their canvas ablaze but the Khonds suffered also. There were only three of them left in the fight and the galley was by now well ahead of them.

They came in sight of the Sark coast, a low dark line above the water. And then, to Carse's great relief, other ships came out to meet them, drawn by the fighting, and the three remaining Khond longships put about and drew off.

IT WAS all easy after that. Ywain was in her own place again. Fresh rowers were put aboard from other ships and one swift craft went ahead of them to carry warning of the attack and news of Ywain's coming.

But the smoke of the burning longships astern was a painful thing to Carse. He looked at the massed sails of the Sea Kings in the far distance and felt the huge and crushing weight of the battle that was to come. It seemed to him in that moment that there was no hope.

They came in late afternoon into the harbor of Sark. A broad estuary offered anchorage for countless ships and on both sides of the channel the city sprawled in careless strength.

It was a city whose massive arrogance suited the men who had built it. Carse saw great temples and the squat magnificence of the palace, crowning the highest hill. The buildings were almost ugly in their solid strength, their buttressed shoulders jutting against the sky, brilliant with harsh colors and strong designs.

Already this whole harbor area was in a feverish sweat of activity. Word of the Sea Kings' coming had started a swift manning of ships and readying of defences, the uproar and tumult of a city preparing for war.

Boghaz, beside him, muttered, "We're mad to walk like this into the dragon's throat. If you can't carry it off as Rhiannon, if you make one slip . . ."

Carse said, "I can do it. I've had considerable practice by now in playing the Cursed One."

But inwardly he was shaken. Confronted by the massive might of Sark it seemed a mad insolence to attempt to play the god here.

Crowds along the waterfront cheered Ywain wildly as she disembarked. And they stared in some amazement at the tall man with her, who looked like a Khond and wore a great sword.

Soldiers formed a guard around them and forced a way through the excited mob. The cheering followed them as they went up through the crowded city streets toward the brooding palace.

They passed at length into the cool dimness of the palace halls. Carse strode down huge echoing rooms with inlaid floors and massive pillars that supported giant beams covered with gold. He noticed that the serpent motif was strong in the decorations.

He wished he had Boghaz with him. He had been forced, for appearance sake, to leave the fat thief behind and he felt terribly alone.

At the silvery doors of the throne room the guard halted. A chamberlain wearing mail under his velvet gown came forward to greet Ywain.

"Your father, the Sovereign King Garach, is overjoyed at your safe return and wishes to welcome you. But he begs you to wait as

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he is closeted with the Lord Hishah, the emissary from Caer Dhu."

Ywain's lips twisted. "So already he asks aid of the Serpent." She nodded imperiously at the closed door. "Tell the king I will see him now."

The chamberlain protested. "But, Highness—"

"Tell him," said Ywain, "or I will enter without permission. Say that there is one with me who demands admittance and whom not even Garach nor all Caer Dhu may deny."

The chamberlain looked in frank puzzlement at Carse. He hesitated, then bowed and went in through the silver doors.

Carse had caught the note of bitterness in Ywain's voice when she spoke of the Serpent. He taxed her with it.

"No, Lord," she said. "I spoke once and you were lenient. It is not my place to speak again. Besides"—she shrugged. —"you see how my father bars me from his confidence in this, even though I must fight his battles for him."

"You do not wish aid from Caer Dhu even now?"

She remained silent, and Carse said, "I bid you to speak!"

"Very well then. It is natural for two strong peoples to fight for mastery when their interests clash on every shore of the same sea. It is natural for men to want power. I could have gloried in this coming battle, gloried in a victory over Khondor. But—"

"Go on."

She cried out then with controlled passion. "But I have wished that Sark had grown great by fair force of arms, man against man, as it was in the old days before Garach made alliance with Caer Dhu! And now there is no glory in a victory won before even the hosts have met."

"And your people," asked Carse. "Do they share your feelings in this?"

"They do, Lord. But enough are tempted by power and spoils—"

She broke off, looking Carse straight in the face.

"I have already said enough to bring your wrath upon me. Therefore I will finish, for I think now that Sark is truly doomed, even in victory. The Serpent gives us aid not for our sakes, but as part of its own design. We have become no more than tools by which Caer Dhu gains its ends. And now that you have come back to lead the Dhuvians—"

She stopped and there was no need for her to finish. The opening of the door saved Carse from the necessity of an answer.

The chamberlain said apologetically, "Highness, your father sends answer that he does not understand your bold words and again begs you to wait his pleasure."

YWAIN thrust him angrily aside and strode to the tall doors, flinging them open. She stood back and said to Carse, "Lord, will you enter?"

He drew a deep breath and entered, striding down the long dim length of the throne room like a very god with Ywain following behind.

The place seemed empty except for Garach, who had sprung to his feet on the dais at the far end. He wore a robe of black velvet worked in gold and he had Ywain's graceful height and handsomeness of feature. But her honest strength was not in him, nor her pride, nor her level glance. For all his graying beard he had the mouth of a petulant greedy child.

Beside him, withdrawn into the shadows by the high seat, another stood also. A dark figure, hooded and cloaked, its face concealed, its hands hidden in the wide sleeves of its robe.

"What means this?" cried Garach angrily. "Daughter or not, Ywain, I'll not stand for such insolence!"

Ywain bent her knee. "My father," she said clearly, "I bring you the Lord Rhiannon of the Quiru, returned from the dead."

Garach's face paled by degrees to the color of ash. His mouth opened, but no words came. He stared at Carse and then at Ywain and finally at the cowled, hooded Dhuvian.

"This is madness," he stammered at last.

"Nevertheless," said Ywain, "I bear witness to its truth. Rhiannon's mind lives in the body of this barbarian. He spoke to the Wise Ones at Khondor and he has spoken since to me. It is Rhiannon who stands before you."

Again there was silence as Garach stared and stared and trembled. Carse stood tall and lordly, outwardly contemptuous of doubt and waiting for acknowledgment.

But the old chilling fear was in him. He knew that ophidian eyes watched him from the shadow under the Dhuvian's cowl and

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it seemed that he could feel their cold gaze sliding through his imposture as a knife blade slips through paper.

The mind-knowledge of the Halflings. The strong extra-sensory perception that could see beyond the appearances of the flesh. And the Dhuvians, for all their evil, were Halflings too.

Carse wanted nothing more at that moment than to break and run. But he forced himself to play the god, arrogant and self-assured, smiling at Garach's fear.

Deep within his brain, in the corner that was no longer his own, he felt a strange and utter stillness. It was as though the invader, the Cursed One, had gone.

Carse forced himself to speak, making his voice ring back from the walls in stern echoes.

"The memories of children are indeed short when even the favorite pupil has forgotten the master."

And he bent his gaze upon Hishah the Dhuvian.

"Do you also doubt me, child of the snake? Must I teach you again, as I taught S'San?"

He lifted the great sword and Garach's eyes flickered to Ywain.

She said, "The Lord Rhiannon slew S'San, aboard the galley."

Garach dropped to his knees.

"Lord," he said submissively, "what is your will?"

Carse ignored him, looking still at the Dhuvian. And the cowled figure moved forward with a peculiar gliding step and spoke in its soft hateful voice.

"Lord, I also ask—what is your will?"

The dark robe rippled as the creature seemed to kneel.

"It is well." Carse crossed his hands over the hilt of the sword, dimming the lustre of the jewel.

"The fleet of the Sea Kings stands in to attack soon. I would have my ancient weapons brought to me that I may crush the enemies of Sark and Caer Dhu, who are also my enemies."

A great hope sprang into Garach's eyes. It was obvious that fear gnawed his vitals—fear of many things, Carse thought, but just now, above all, fear of the Sea Kings. He glanced aside at Hishah and the cowled creature said,

"Lord, your weapons have been taken to Caer Dhu."

The Earthman's heart sank. Then he remembered Rold of Khondor, and how they must have broken him to get the secret of the Tomb and a blind rage came over him. The snarl of fury in his voice was not feigned, only the sense of his words.

"You dared to tamper with the power of Rhiannon?" He advanced toward the Dhuvian. "Can it be that the pupil now hopes to outrival the master?"

"No, Lord!" The veiled head bowed. "We have but kept your weapons safe for you."

Carse permitted his features to relax somewhat.

"Very well, then. See that they are returned to me here and at once!"

Hishah rose. "Yes, Lord. I will go now to Caer Dhu to do your bidding."

The Dhuvian glided toward an inner door and was gone, leaving Carse in a secret sweat of mingled relief and apprehension.

CHAPTER XVII

Caer Dhu

THE next few hours were an eternity of unbearable tension for Carse.

He demanded an apartment for himself, on the ground that he must have privacy to draw his plans. And there he paced up and down in a fine state of nerves, looking most ungodlike.

It seemed that he had succeeded. The Dhuvian had accepted him. Perhaps, he thought, the Serpent folk after all lacked the astoundingly developed extra-sensory powers of the Swimmers and the winged men.

It appeared that all he had to do now was to wait for the Dhuvian to return with the weapons, load them aboard his ship and go away. He could do that, for no one would dare to question the plans of Rhiannon and he had time also. The Sea Kings' fleet was standing off, waiting for all its force to come up. There would be no attack before dawn, none at all if he succeeded.

But some raw primitive nerve twitched to the sense of danger and Carse was oppressed by a foreboding fear.

He sent for Boghaz on the pretext of

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giving orders concerning the galley. His real reason was that he could not bear to be alone. The fat thief was jubilant when he heard the news.

"You have brought it off," he chuckled, rubbing his hands together in delight. "I have always said, Carse, that sheer gall would carry a man through anything. I, Boghaz, could not have done better."

Carse said dourly, "I hope you're right."

Boghaz gave him a sidelong glance. "Carse—"

"Yes?"

"What of the Cursed One himself?"

"Nothing. Not a sign. It worries me, Boghaz. I have the feeling that he's waiting."

"When you get the weapons in your hands," Boghaz said meaningly, "I'll stand by you with a belaying pin."

The soft-footed chamberlain brought word at last that Hishah had returned from Caer Dhu and awaited audience with him.

"It is well," said Carse and then nodded curtly toward Boghaz. "This man will come with me to supervise the handling of the weapons."

The Valkisian's ruddy cheeks lost several shades of color but he came perforce at Carse's heels.

Garach and Ywain were in the throne room and the black-cowled creature from Caer Dhu. All bowed as Carse entered.

"Well," he demanded of the Dhuvian, "have you obeyed my command?"

"Lord," said Hishah softly, "I took counsel with the Elders, who send you this word. Had they known that the Lord Rhiannon had returned they would not have presumed to touch those things which are his. And now they fear to touch them again lest in their ignorance they do damage or cause destruction.

"Therefore, Lord, they beg you to arrange this matter yourself. Also they have not forgotten their love for Rhiannon, whose teachings raised them from the dust. They wish to welcome you to your old kingdom in Caer Dhu, for your children have been long in darkness and would once again know the light of Rhiannon's wisdom, and his strength.

Hishah made a now obeisance. "Lord, will you grant them this?"

Carse stood silent for a moment, trying desperately to conceal his dread. He could not go to Caer Dhu. He dared not go! How long could he hope to conceal his deception from the children of the Serpent, the oldest deceiver of all?

If, indeed, he had concealed it at all. Hishah's soft words reeked of a subtle trap.

And trapped he was and knew it. He dared not go—but even more he dared not refuse.

He said, "I am pleased to grant them their request."

Hishah bowed his head in thanks. "All preparations are made. The King Garach and his daughter will accompany you that you may be suitably attended. Your children realize the need for haste—the barge is waiting."

"Good." Carse turned on his heel, fixing Boghaz as he did so with a steely look.

"You will attend me also, man of Valkis. I may have need of you with regard to the weapons."

Boghaz got his meaning. If he had paled before he turned now a livid white with pure horror but there was not a word he could say. Like a man led to execution he followed Carse out of the throne room.

NIGHT brooded black and heavy as they embarked at the palace stair in a low black craft without sail or oar. Creatures hooded and robed like Hishah thrust long poles into the water and the barge moved out into the estuary, heading up away from the sea.

Garach crouched amid the sable cushions of a divan, an unkingly figure with shaking hands and cheeks the color of bone. His eyes kept furtively seeking the muffled form of Hishah. It was plain that he did not relish this visit to the court of his allies.

Ywain had withdrawn herself to the far side of the barge, where she sat looking out into the sombre darkness of the marshy shore. Carse thought she seemed more depressed than she ever had when she was a prisoner in chains.

He too sat by himself, outwardly lordly and magnificent, inwardly shaken to the soul. Boghaz crouched nearby. His eyes were the eyes of a sick man.

And the Cursed One, the real Rhiannon, was still. Too still. In that buried corner of Carse's mind there was not a stir, not a flicker. It seemed that the dark outcast of the Quiru was like all the others aboard, withdrawn and waiting.

It seemed a long way up the estuary. The

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water slid past the barge with a whisper of sibilant mirth. The black-robed figures bent and swayed at the poles. Now and again a bird cried from the marshland and the night air was heavy and brooding.

Then, in the light of the little low moons, Carse saw ahead the ragged walls and ramparts of a city rising from the mists, an old, old city walled like a castle. It sprawled away into ruin on all sides and only the great central keep was whole.

There was a flickering radiance in the air around the place. Carse thought that it was his imagination, a visual illusion caused by the moonlight and the glowing water and the pale mist.

The barge drew in toward a crumbling quay. It came to rest and Hishah stepped ashore, bowing as he waited for Rhiannon to pass.

Carse strode up along the quay with Garach and Ywain and the shivering Boghaz following. Hishah remained deferentially at the Earthman's heels.

A causeway of black stone, much cracked by the weight of years, led up toward the citadel. Carse set his feet resolutely upon it. Now he was sure that he could see a faint, pulsing web of light around Caer Dhu. It lay over the whole city, glimmering with a steely luminescence, like starlight on a frosty night.

He did not like the look of it. As he approached it, where it crossed the causeway like a veil before the great gate, he liked it less and less.

Yet no one spoke, no one faltered. He seemed to be expected to lead the way, and he did not dare to betray his ignorance of the nature of the thing. So he forced his steps to go on, strong and sure.

He was close enough to the gleaming web to feel a strange prickling of force. One more stride would have taken him into it. And then Hishah said sharply in his ear, "Lord! Have you forgotten the Veil, whose touch is death?"

Carse recoiled. A shock of fear went through him and at the same time he realized that he had blundered badly.

He said quickly, "Of course I have not forgotten!"

"No, Lord," Hishah murmured. "How indeed could you forget when it was you who taught us the secret of the Veil which warps space and shields Caer Dhu from any force?"

Carse knew now that that gleaming web was a defensive barrier of energy, of such potent energy that it somehow set up a space-strain which nothing could penetrate.

It seemed incredible. Yet Quiru science had been great and Rhiannon had taught some of it to the forefathers of these Dhuvians.

"How, indeed, could *you* forget?" Hishah repeated.

There was no hint of mockery in his words and yet Carse felt that it was there.

The Dhuvian stepped forward, raising his sleeved arms in a signal to some watcher within the gate. The luminescence of the Veil died out above the causeway, leaving a path open through it.

And as Carse turned to go on he saw that Ywain was staring at him with a look of startled wonder in which a doubt was already beginning to grow. The great gate swung open and the Lord Rhiannon of the Quiru was received into Caer Dhu.

THE ancient halls were dimly lighted by what seemed to be globes of prisoned fire that stood on tripods at long intervals, shedding a cool greenish glow. The air was warm and the taint of the Serpent lay heavy in it, closing Carse's throat with its hateful sickliness.

Hishah went before them now and that in itself was a sign of danger, since Rhiannon should have known the way. But Hishah said that he wished the honor of announcing his lord and Carse could do nothing but choke down his growing terror and follow.

They came into a vast central place, closed in by towering walls of the black rock that rose to a high vault, lost in darkness overhead. Below, a single large globe lightened the heavy shadows.

Little light for human eyes. But even that was too much!

For here the children of the serpent were gathered to greet their lord. And here in their own place they were not shrouded in the cowled robes they wore when they went among men.

The Swimmers belonged to the sea, the Sky Folk to the high air, and they were perfect and beautiful in accordance with their elements. Now Carse saw the third pseudo-human race of the Halflings—the children of the hidden places, the perfect, dreadfully perfect offspring of another great order of life.

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In that first overwhelming shock of revulsion Carse was hardly aware of Hishah's voice saying the name of Rhiannon and the soft, sibilant cry of greeting that followed was only the tongue of nightmare speaking.

From the edges of the wide floor they hailed him and from the open galleries above, their depthless eyes glittering, their narrow ophidian heads bowed in homage.

Sinuous bodies that moved with effortless ease, seeming to flow rather than step. Hands with supple jointless fingers and feet that made no sound and lipless mouths that seemed to open always on silent laughter, infinitely cruel. And all through that vast place whispered a dry harsh rustling, the light friction of skin that had lost its primary scales but not its serpentine roughness.

Carse raised the sword of Rhiannon in acknowledgment of that welcome and forced himself to speak.

"Rhiannon is pleased by the greeting of his children."

It seemed to him that a little hissing ripple of mirth ran through the great hall. But he could not be sure, and Hishah said,

"My Lord, here are your ancient weapons."

They were in the center of the cleared space. All the cryptic mechanisms he had seen in the Tomb were here, the great flat crystal wheel, the squat looped metal rods, the others, all glittering in the dim light.

Carse's heart leaped and settled to a heavy pounding. "Good," he said. "The time is short—take them aboard the barge, that I may return to Sark at once."

"Certainly, Lord," said Hishah. "But will you not inspect them first to make sure that all is well. Our ignorant handling . . ."

Carse strode to the weapons and made a show of examining them. Then he nodded.

"No damage has been done. And now—"

Hishah broke in, unctuously courteous. "Before you go, will you not explain the workings of these instruments? Your children were always hungry for knowledge."

"There is no time for that," Carse said angrily. "Also, you are as you say—children. You could not comprehend."

"Can it be, Lord," asked Hishah very softly, "that you yourself do not comprehend?"

There was a moment of utter stillness. The icy certainty of doom took Carse in its grip. He saw now that the ranks of the Dhuvians had closed in behind them, barring all hope of escape.

Within the circle Garach and Ywain and Boghaz stood with him. There was shocked amazement on Garach's face and the Valkisian sagged with the weight of horror that had come as no surprise to him. Ywain alone was not amazed, or horrified. She looked at Carse with the eyes of a woman who fears but in a different way. It came to Carse that she feared for him, that she did not want him to die.

In a last desperate attempt to save himself Carse cried out furiously,

"What means this insolence? Would you have me take up my weapons and use them against you?"

"Do so, if you can," Hishah said softly. "Do so, oh false Rhiannon, for assuredly by no other means will you ever leave Caer Dhu!"

CHAPTER XVIII

The Wrath of Rhiannon

CARSE stood where he was, surrounded by the crystal and metal mechanisms that had no meaning for him, and knew with terrible finality that he was beaten. And now the hissing laughter broke forth on all sides, infinitely cruel and jeering.

Garach put out a trembling hand toward Hishah. "Then," he stammered, "this is not Rhiannon?"

"Even your human mind should tell you that much now," answered Hishah contemptuously. He had thrown back his cowl and now he moved toward Carse, his ophidian eyes full of mockery.

"By the touching of minds alone I would have known you false but even that I did not need. You, Rhiannon! Rhiannon of the Quiru, who came in peace and brotherhood to greet his children in Caer Dhu!"

The stealthy evil laughter hissed from every Dhuvian throat and Hishah threw his head back, the skin of his throat pulsing with his mirth.

"Look at him, my brothers! Hail Rhiannon, who did not know of the Veil nor why it guards Caer Dhu!"

And they hailed him, bowing low.

Carse stood very still. For the moment he had even forgotten to be afraid.

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"You fool," said Hishah. "Rhiannon hated us at the end. For at the end he learned his folly, learned that the pupils to whom he gave the crumbs of knowledge had grown too clever. With the Veil, whose secret he had taught us, we made our city impregnable even to his mighty weapons, so that when he turned finally against us it was too late."

Carse said slowly, "Why did he turn against you?"

Hishah laughed. "He learned the use we had for the knowledge he had given us."

Ywain came forward, one step, and said, "What was that use?"

"I think you know already," Hishah answered. "That is why you and Garach were summoned here—not only to see this impostor unmasked but to learn once and for all your place in our world."

His soft voice had in it now the bite of the conqueror.

"Since Rhiannon was locked in his tomb we have gained subtle dominance on every shore of the White Sea. We are few in number and averse to open warfare. Therefore we have worked through the human kingdoms, using your greedy people as our tools.

"Now we have the weapons of Rhiannon. Soon we will master their use and then we will no longer need human tools. The Children of the Serpent will rule in every palace—and we will require only obedience and respect from our subjects.

"How think you of that, Ywain of the proud head, who have always loathed and scorned us?"

"I think," said Ywain, "that I will fall upon my own sword first."

Hishah shrugged. "Fall then." He turned to Garach. "And you?"

But Garach had already crumpled to the stones in a dead faint.

Hishah turned again to Carse. "And now," he said, "you shall see how we welcome our lord!"

Boghaz moaned and covered his face with his hands. Carse gripped the futile sword tighter and asked in a strange, low voice,

"And no one ever knew that Rhiannon had finally turned against you Dhuvians?"

Hishah answered softly, "The Quiru knew but nevertheless they condemned Rhiannon because his repentance came too late. Other than they only we knew. And why should we tell the world when it pleased our humor to see Rhiannon, who hated us, cursed as our friend?"

Carse closed his eyes. The world rocked under him, and there was a roaring in his ears, as the revelation burst upon him.

Rhiannon had spoken the truth in the place of the Wise Ones. Had spoken truth when he voiced his hatred of the Dhuvians!

The hall was filled with a sound like the rustling of dry leaves as the ranks of the Dhuvians closed gently in toward Carse.

With an effort of will almost beyond human strength Carse threw open all the channels of his mind, trying desperately now in this last minute to reach inward to that strangely silent, hidden corner.

He cried aloud, *"Rhiannon!"*

That hoarse cry made the Dhuvians pause. Not because of fear but because of laughter. This, indeed, was the climax of the jest!

Hishah cried, "Aye, call upon Rhiannon! Perhaps he will come from his Tomb to aid you!"

And they watched Carse out of their depthless jeering eyes as he swayed in torment.

BUT Ywain knew. Swiftly she moved to Carse's side and her sword came rasping out of the sheath, to protect him as long as it could.

Hishah laughed. "A fitting pair—the princess without an empire and the would-be-god!"

Carse said again, in a broken whisper, *"Rhiannon!"*

And Rhiannon answered.

From the depths of Carse's mind where he had lain hidden the Cursed One came, surging in terrible strength through every cell and atom of the Earthman's brain, possessing him utterly now that Carse had opened the way.

As it had been before in the place of the Wise Ones the consciousness of Matthew Carse stood aside in his own body and watched and listened.

He heard the voice of Rhiannon—the real and godlike voice that he had only copied—ring forth from his own lips in anger that was beyond human power to know.

"Behold your Lord, oh crawling children of the Serpent! Behold—and die!"

The mocking laughter died away into silence. Hishah gave back and into his eyes came the beginning of fear.

Rhiannon's voice rolled out, thundering against the walls. The strength and fury of

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Rhiannon blazed in the Earthman's face and now his body seemed to tower over the Dhuvians and the sword was a thing of lightning in his hands.

"What now of the touching of minds, Hishah? Probe deeply—more deeply than you did before when your feeble powers could not penetrate the mental barrier I set against you!"

Hishah voiced a high and hissing scream. He recoiled in horror and the circle of the Dhuvians broke as they turned to seek their weapons, their lipless mouths stretched wide in fear.

Rhiannon laughed, the terrible laughter of one who has waited through an age for vengeance and finds it at last.

"Run! Run and strive—for in your great wisdom you have let Rhiannon through your guarding Veil and death is on Caer Dhu!"

And the Dhuvians ran, writhing in the shadows as they caught up the weapons they had not thought to need. The green light glinted on the shining tubes and prisms.

But the hand of Carse, guided now by the sure knowledge of Rhiannon, had darted toward the biggest of the ancient weapons—toward the rim of the great flat crystal wheel. He set the wheel to spinning.

There must have been some intricate triggering of power within the metal globe, some hidden control that his fingers touched. Carse never knew. He only knew that a strange dark halo appeared in the dim air, enclosing himself and Ywain and the shuddering Boghaz and Garach, who had risen doglike to his hands and knees and was watching with eyes that held no shred of sanity. The ancient weapons were also enclosed in that ring of dark force, and a faint singing rose from the crystal rods.

The dark ring began to expand, like a circular wave sweeping outward.

The weapons of the Dhuvians strove against it. Lances of lightning, of cold flame and searing brilliance, leaped toward it, struck—and splintered and died. Powerful electric discharges that broke themselves on the invisible dielectric that shielded Rhiannon's circle.

Rhiannon's ring of dark force expanded relentlessly, out and out, and where it touched the Dhuvians the cold ophidian bodies withered and shriveled and lay like cast-off skins upon the stones.

Rhiannon spoke no more. Carse felt the deadly throb of power in his hand as the shining wheel spun faster and faster on its mount and his mind shuddered away from what he could sense in Rhiannon's mind.

For he could sense dimly the nature of the Cursed One's terrible weapon. It was akin to that deadly ultra-violet radiation of the Sun which would destroy all life were it not for the shielding ozone in the atmosphere.

But where the ultra-violet radiation known to Carse's Earth science was easily absorbed, that of Rhiannon's ancient alien science lay in uncharted octaves below the four-hundred angstrom limit and could be produced as an expanding halo that no known matter could absorb. And where it touched living tissue, it killed.

Carse hated the Dhuvians but never in the world had there been such hatred in a human heart as he felt now in Rhiannon.

Garach began to whimper. Whimpering, he recoiled from the blazing eyes of the man who towered above him. Half scrambling, half running, he darted away with a sound like laughter in his throat.

Straight out into the dark ring he ran and death received him and silently withered him.

SPREADING, spreading, the silent force pulsed outward. Through metal and flesh and stone it went, withering, killing, hunting down the last child of the Serpent who fled through the dark corridors of Caer Dhu. No more weapons flamed against it. No more supple arms were raised to fend it off.

It struck the enclosing Veil at last. Carse felt the subtle shock of its checking and then Rhiannon stopped the wheel.

There was a time of utter silence as those three who were left alive in the city stood motionless, too stunned almost to breathe.

At last the voice of Rhiannon spoke. *"The Serpent is dead. Let his city—and my weapons that have wrought such evil in this world—pass with the Dhuvians."*

He turned from the crystal wheel and sought another instrument, one of the squat looped metal rods.

He raised the small black thing and pressed a secret spring and from the leaden tube that formed its muzzle came a little spark, too bright for the eye to look upon.

Only a tiny fleck of light that settled on the stones. But it began to grow. It seemed to feed on the atoms of the rock as flame feeds on wood. Like wildfire it leaped across

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the flags. It touched the crystal wheel and the weapon that had destroyed the Serpent was itself consumed.

A chain-reaction such as no nuclear scientist of Earth had conceived, one that could make the atoms of metal and crystal and stone as unstable as the high-number radioactive elements.

Rhiannon said, *"Come."*

They walked through the empty corridors in silence and behind them the strange witchfire fed and fattened and the vast central hall was enveloped in its swift destruction.

The knowledge of Rhiannon guided Carse to the nerve-center of the Veil, to a chamber by the great gate, there to set the controls so that the glimmering web was forever darkened.

They passed out of the citadel and went back down the broken causeway to the quay where the black barge floated.

Then they turned, and looked back, upon the destruction of a city.

They shielded their eyes, for the strange and awful blaze had something in it of the fire of the Sun. It had raced hungrily outward through the sprawling ruins, and made of the central keep a torch that lighted all the sky, blotting out the stars, paling the low moons.

The causeway began to burn, a lengthening tongue of flame between the reeds of the marshland.

Rhiannon raised the squat looped tube again. From it, now, a dim little globule of light not a spark, flew toward the nearing blaze.

And the blaze hesitated, wavered, then began to dull and die.

The witchfire of strange atomic reaction that Rhiannon had triggered he had now damped and killed by some limiting counter-factor whose nature Carse could not dream.

They poled the barge out onto the water as the quivering radiance behind them sank and died. And then the night was dark again and of Caer Dhu there was nothing to be seen but steam.

The voice of Rhiannon spoke, once more. *"It is done,"* he said. *"I have redeemed my sin."*

The Earthman felt the utter weariness of the being within him as the possession was withdrawn from his brain and body.

And then, again, he was only Matthew Carse.

CHAPTER XIX

Judgment of the Quiru

THE whole world seemed hushed and still in the dawn as their barge went down to Sark. None of them spoke and none of them looked back at the vast white steam that still rolled solemnly up across the sky.

Carse felt numbed, drained of all emotion. He had let the wrath of Rhiannon use him and he could not yet feel quite the same. He knew that there was something of it still in his face, for the other two would not quite meet his eyes nor did they break the silence.

The great crowd gathered on the waterfront of Sark was silent too. It seemed that they had stood there for long looking toward Caer Dhu, and even now, after the glare of its destruction had died out of the sky, they stared with white, frightened faces.

Carse looked out at the Khond longships riding with their sails slack against the yards and knew that that terrible blaze had awed the Sea Kings into waiting.

The black barge glided in to the palace stair. The crowd surged forward as Ywain stepped ashore, their voices rising in a strange hushed clamor. And Ywain spoke to them.

"Caer Dhu and the Serpent both are gone—destroyed by the Lord Rhiannon."

She turned instinctively toward Carse. And the eyes of all that vast throng dwelt upon him as the word spread, growing at last to an overwhelming cry of thankfulness.

"Rhiannon! Rhiannon the Deliverer!"

He was the Cursed One no longer, at least not to these Sarks. And for the first time, Carse realized the loathing they had had for the allies Garach had forced upon them.

He walked toward the palace with Ywain and Boghaz and knew with a sense of awe how it felt to be a god. They entered the dim cool halls and it seemed already as though a shadow had gone out of them. Ywain paused at the doors of the throne room as though she had just remembered that she was ruler now in Garach's place.

She turned to Carse and said, "If the Sea Kings still attack . . ."

"They won't—not until they know what

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happened. And now we must find Rold if he still lives."

"He lives," said Ywain. "After the Dhuvians emptied Rold of his knowledge my father held him as hostage for me."

They found the Lord of Khondor at last, chained in the dungeons deep under the palace walls. He was wasted and drawn with suffering but he still had the spirit left to raise his red head and snarl at Carse and Ywain.

"Demon," he said. "Traitor. Have you and your hellcat come at last to kill me?"

Carse told him the story of Caer Dhu and Rhiannon, watching Rold's expression change slowly from savage despair to a stunned and unbelieving joy.

"Your fleet stands off Sark under Ironbeard," he finished. "Will you take this word to the Sea Kings and bring them in to parley?"

"Aye," said Rold. "By the gods I will!" He stared at Carse, shaking his head. "A strange dream of madness these last days have been! And now—to think that I would have slain you gladly in the place of the Wise Ones with my own hand!

That was shortly after dawn. By noon the council of the Sea Kings was assembled in the throne room with Rold at their head and Emer, who had refused to stay behind in Khondor.

They sat around a long table. Ywain occupied the throne and Carse stood apart from all of them. His face was stern and very weary and there was in it still a hint of strangeness.

He said with finality, "There need be no war now. The Serpent is gone and without its power Sark can no longer oppress her neighbors. The subject cities, like Jekkara and Valkis, will be freed. The empire of Sark is no more."

Ironbeard leaped to his feet, crying fiercely, "Then now is our chance to destroy Sark forever!"

Others of the Sea Kings rose, Thorn of Tarak loud among them, shouting their assent. Ywain's hand tightened upon her sword.

Carse stepped forward, his eyes blazing. "I say there will be peace! Must I call upon Rhiannon to enforce my word?"

They quieted, awed by that threat, and Rold bade them sit and hold their tongues.

"There has been enough of fighting and bloodshed," he told them sternly. "And for the future we can meet Sark on equal terms. I am Lord of Khondor and I say that Khondor will make peace!"

Caught between Carse's threat and Rold's decision the Sea Kings one by one agreed. Then Emer spoke. "The slaves must all be freed—human and Halfling alike."

Carse nodded. "It will be done."

"And," said Rold, "there is another condition." He faced Carse with unalterable determination. "I have said we will make peace with Sark—but not, though you bring fifty Rhiannons against us, with a Sark that is ruled by Ywain!"

"Aye," roared the Sea Kings. looking wolf-eyed at Ywain. "That is our word also!"

There was a silence then and Ywain rose from the high seat, her face proud and sombre.

"The condition is met," she said. "I have no wish to rule over a Sark tamed and stripped of empire. I hated the Serpent as you did—but it is too late for me to be queen of a petty village of fishermen. The people may choose another ruler."

SHE stepped down from the dais and went from them to stand erect by a window at the far end of the room, looking out over the harbor.

Carse turned to the Sea Kings. "It is agreed, then.",

And they answered, "It is agreed."

Emer, whose fey gaze had not wavered from Carse since the beginning of the parley, came to his side now, laying her hand on his. "And where is your place in this?" she asked softly.

Carse looked down at her, rather dazedly. "I have not had time to think."

But it must be thought of, now. And he did not know.

As long as he bore within him the shadow of Rhiannon this world would never accept him as a man. Honor he might have but never anything more and the lurking fear of the Cursed One would remain. Too many centuries of hate had grown around that name.

Rhiannon had redeemed his crime but even so, as long as Mars lived, he would be remembered as the Cursed One.

As though in answer, for the first time since Caer Dhu the dark invader stirred and his thought-voice whispered in Carse's mind.

"Go back to the Tomb and I will leave

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you, for I would follow my brothers. After that you are free. I can guide you back along that pathway to your own time if you wish. Or you can remain here."

And still Carse did not know.

He liked this green and smiling Mars. But as he looked at the Sea Kings, who were waiting for his answer, and then beyond them through the windows to the White Sea and the marshes, it came to him that this was not his world, that he could never truly belong to it.

He spoke at last and as he did so he saw Ywain's face turned toward him in the shadows.

"Emer knew and the Halflings also that I was not of your world. I came from out of space and time, along the pathway which is hidden in the Tomb of Rhiannon."

He paused to let them grasp that and they did not seem greatly astonished. Because of what had happened they could believe anything of him, even though it be beyond their comprehension.

Carse said heavily, "A man is born into one world and there he belongs. I am going back to my own place."

He could see that even though they protested courteously, the Sea Kings were relieved.

"The blessings of the gods attend you, stranger," Emer whispered and kissed him gently on the lips.

Then she went and the jubilant Sea Kings went with her. Boghaz had slipped out and Carse and Ywain were alone in the great empty room.

He went to her, looking into her eyes that had not lost their old fire even now. "And where will you go now?" he asked her.

She answered quietly, "If you will let me I go with you."

He shook his head. "No. You could not live in my world, Ywain. It's a cruel and bitter place, very old and near to death."

"It does not matter. My own world also is dead."

He put his hands on her shoulders, strong beneath the mailed shirt. "You don't understand. I came a long way across time—a million years." He paused, not quite knowing how to tell her.

"Look out there. Think how it will be when the White Sea is only a desert of blowing dust—when the green is gone from the hills and the white cities are crumbled and the river beds are dry."

Ywain understood and sighed. "Age and death come at last to everything. And death will come very swiftly to me if I remain here. I am outcast and my name is hated even as Rhiannon's."

He knew that she was not afraid of death but was merely using that argument to sway him.

And yet the argument was true.

"Could you be happy," he asked, "with the memory of your own world haunting you at every step?"

"I have never been happy," she answered, "and therefore I shall not miss it." She looked at him fairly. "I will take the risk. Will you?"

His fingers tightened. "Yes," he said huskily. "Yes, I will."

He took her in his arms and kissed her and when she drew back she whispered, with a shyness utterly new in her, "The 'Lord Rhiannon' spoke truly when he taunted me concerning the barbarian." She was silent a moment, then added, "I think which world we dwell in will not matter much, as long as we are together in it."

Days later the black galley pulled into Jekkara harbor, finishing her last voyage under the ensign of Ywain of Sark.

It was a strange greeting she and Carse received there, where the whole city had gathered to see the stranger, who was also the Cursed One, and the Sovereign Lady of Sark, who was no more a sovereign. The crowd kept back at a respectful distance and they cheered the destruction of Caer Dhu and the death of the Serpent. But for Ywain they had no welcome.

Only one man stood on the quay to meet them. It was Boghaz—a very splendid Boghaz, robed in velvet and loaded down with jewels, wearing a golden circlet on his head.

He had vanished out of Sark on the day of the parley on some mission of his own and it seemed that he had succeeded.

He bowed to Carse and Ywain with grandiloquent politeness.

"I have been to Valkis," he said. "It's a free city again—and because of my unparalleled heroism in helping to destroy Caer Dhu I have been chosen king."

He beamed, then added with a confidential grin, "I always did dream of looting a royal treasury!"

"But," Carse reminded him, "it's *your* treasury now."

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BOGHAZ started. "By the gods, it is so!" He drew himself up, waxing suddenly stern. "I see that I shall have to be severe with thieves in Valkis. There will be heavy punishment for any crime against property—especially royal property!"

"And fortunately," said Carse gravely, "you are acquainted with all the knavish tricks of thieves."

"That is true," said Boghaz sententiously. "I have always said that knowledge is a valuable thing. Behold now, how my purely academic studies of the lawless elements will help me to keep my people safe!"

He accompanied them through Jekkara, until they reached the open country beyond, and then he bade them farewell, plucking off a ring which he thrust into Carse's hand. Tears ran down his fat cheeks.

"Wear this, old friend, that you may remember Boghaz, who guided your steps wisely through a strange world."

He turned and stumbled away and Carse watched his fat figure vanish into the streets of the city, where they had first met.

All alone Carse and Ywain made their way into the hills above Jekkara and came at last to the Tomb. They stood together on the rocky ledge, looking out across the wooded hills and the glowing sea, and the distant towers of the city white in the sunlight.

"Are you still sure," Carse asked her, "that you wish to leave all this?"

"I have no place here now," she answered sadly. "I would be rid of this world as it would be rid of me."

She turned and strode without hesitation into the dark tunnel. Ywain the Proud, that not even the gods themselves could break! Carse went with her, holding a lighted torch.

Through the echoing vault and beyond the door marked with the curse of Rhiannon, into the inner chamber, where the torchlight struck against darkness—the utter darkness of that strange aperture in the space-time continuum of the universe.

At that last moment Ywain's face showed fear and she caught the Earthman's hand. The tiny motes swarmed and flickered before them in the gloom of time itself. The voice of Rhiannon spoke to Carse and he stepped forward into the darkness, holding tightly to Ywain's hand.

This time, at first, there was no headlong plunge into nothingness. The wisdom of Rhiannon guided and steadied them. The torch went out. Carse dropped it. His heart pounded and he was blind and deaf in the soundless vortex of force.

Again Rhiannon spoke. *"See now with my mind what your human eyes could not see before!"*

The pulsing darkness cleared in some strange way that had nothing to do with light or sight. Carse looked upon Rhiannon.

His body lay in a coffin of dark crystal, whose inner facets glowed with the subtle force that prisoned him forever as though frozen in the heart of a jewel.

Through the cloudy substance, Carse could make out dimly a naked form of more than human strength and beauty, so vital and instinct with life that it seemed a terrible thing to prison it in that narrow space. The face also was beautiful, dark and imperious and stormy even now, with the eyes closed as though in death.

But there could be no death in this place. It was beyond time and without time there is no decay and Rhiannon would have all eternity to lie there, remembering his sin.

While he stared, Carse realized that the alien being had withdrawn from him so gently and carefully that there had been no shock. His mind was still in touch with the mind of Rhiannon but the strange dualism was ended. The Cursed One had released him.

Yet, through that sympathy that still existed between these two minds that had been one for so long, Carse heard Rhiannon's passionate call—a mental cry that pulsed far out along the pathway through space and time.

"My brothers of the Quiru, hear me! I have undone my ancient crime."

Again he called with all the wild strength of his will. There was a period of silence, of nothingness and then, gradually, Carse sensed the approach of other minds, grave and powerful and stern.

He would never know from what far world they had come. Long ago the Quiru had gone out by this road that led beyond the universe, to cosmic regions forever outside his ken. And now they had come back briefly in answer to Rhiannon's call.

Dim and shadowy, Carse saw godlike forms come slowly into being, tenuous as shining smoke in the gloom.

"Let me go with you, my brothers! For I have destroyed the Serpent and my sin is redeemed."

It seemed that the Quiru pondered, search-

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ing Rhiannon's heart for truth. Then at last one stepped forward and laid his hand upon the coffin. The subtle fires died within it.

"It is our judgment that Rhiannon may go free."

A giddiness came over Carse. The scene began to fade. He saw Rhiannon rise and go to join his brothers of the Quiru, his body growing shadowy as he passed.

He turned once to look at Carse, and his eyes were open now, full of a joy beyond human understanding.

"Keep my sword, Earthman—bear it proudly, for without you I could never have destroyed Caer Dhu."

Dizzy, half fainting, Carse received the last mental command. And as he staggered with Ywain through the dark vortex, falling now with nightmare swiftness through the eerie gloom, he heard the last ringing echo of Rhiannon's farewell.

CHAPTER XX

The Return

THERE was solid rock under their feet at last. They crept trembling away from the vortex, white-faced and shaken, saying nothing, wanting only to be free of that dark vault.

Carse found the tunnel. But when he reached the end he was oppressed by a dread that he might be once again lost in time, and dared not look out.

He need not have feared. Rhiannon had guided them surely. He stood again among the barren hills of his own Mars. It was sunset, and the vast reaches of the dead sea-bottom were flooded with the dull red light. The wind came cold and dry out of the desert, blowing the dust, and there was Jekkara in the distance—his own Jekkara of the Low Canals.

He turned anxiously to Ywain, watching her face as she looked for the first time upon his world. He saw her lips tighten as though over a deep pain.

Then she threw her shoulders back and smiled and settled the hilt of her sword in its sheathe.

"Let us go," she said and placed her hand again in his.

They walked the long weary way across the desolate land and the ghosts of the past were all around them. Now, over the bones of Mars, Carse could see the living flesh that had clothed it once in splendor, the tall trees and the rich earth, and he would never forget.

He looked out across the dead sea-bottom and knew that all the years of his life he would hear the booming roll of surf on the shores of a spectral ocean.

Darkness came. The little low moons rose in the cloudless sky. Ywain's hand was firm and strong in his. Carse was aware of a great happiness rising within him. His steps quickened.

They came into the streets of Jekkara, the crumbling streets beside the Low-Canal. The dry wind shook the torches and the sound of the harps was as he remembered and the little dark women made tinkling music as they walked.

Ywain smiled. "It is still Mars," she said.

They walked together through the twisting ways—the man who still bore in his face the dark shadow of a god and the woman who had been a queen. The people drew apart to let them pass, staring after them in wonder, and the sword of Rhiannon was like a sceptre in Carse's hand.

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

FURY FROM LILLIPUT

An Astonishing Novelet by MURRAY LEINSTER

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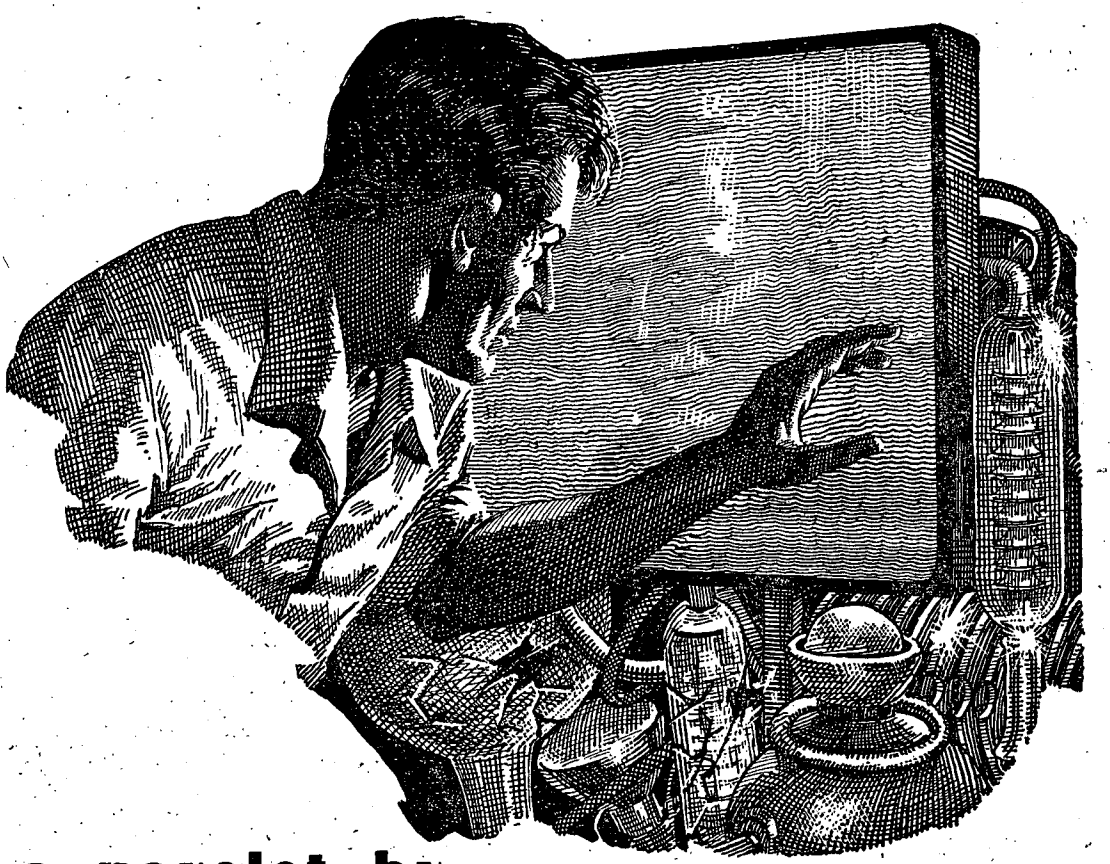

a novelet by

RAYMOND F. JONES

Cal Meacham was proud of his scientific talents till he found himself faced with alien products that could only have come from another culture!

CHAPTER I

Unit 16

THE offices of Joe Wilson, purchasing agent for Ryberg Instrument Corporation, looked out over the company's private landing field. He stood there by the window now, wishing that they didn't, because it was an eternal reminder that he'd once had hopes of becoming an engineer intead of an office flunky.

Through the window he saw the silver test ship of the radio lab level off at bullet speed, circle once and land. That would be Cal Meacham at the controls, Joe thought. Even the company pilots didn't dare bring a ship in that way. But Cal Meacham was the best man in the radio instrument business and getting canned was a meaningless penalty for him. He could get the same or higher salary from a dozen other places for the asking.

Joe chomped irritably on his cigar and turned away from the window. Then he picked up a letter from his desk. It was in

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There was something of the unknown in the eyes of the man who watched Cal from the plate

the ALIEN MACHINE

answer to an order he had placed for condensers for Cal's hot transmitter job—Cal's stuff was always hot, Joe thought. He'd already read the letter three times but he started on it for the fourth.

Dear Mr. Wilson:

We were pleased to receive your order of the 8th for samples of our XC-109 condenser. However we find that our present catalogue lists no such item nor did we ever carry it.

We are, therefore, substituting the AB-619 model, a high-voltage oil-filled transmitting-type condenser. As you specified, it is rated at 10,000 volts with 100% safety factor and has 4 mf. capacity.

We trust these will meet with your approval and that we may look forward to receiving your production order for these items. It is needless, of course, to remind you that we manufacture a complete line of electronic components. We would be glad to furnish samples of any items from our stock which might interest you.

Respectfully yours,
A. G. Archmanter
Electronic Service—Unit 16.

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Joe Wilson put the letter down slowly and picked up the box of beads which had come with it. Complete and resigned disgust occupied his face.

He picked up a bead by one of the leads that stuck out of it. The bead was about a quarter of an inch in diameter and there seemed to be a smaller concentric shell inside it. Between the two appeared to be some reddish liquid. Another wire connected to the inner shell but for the life of him Joe couldn't see how that inner wire came through the outer shell.

There was something funny about it, as if it came directly from the inner without passing through the outer. He knew that was silly but it made him dizzy to try to concentrate on the spot where it came through. The spot seemed to shift and move.

"Ten thousand volts!" he muttered. "Four mikes!"

He tossed the bead back into the box with disgust. Cal would be hotter than the transmitter job when he saw these.

JOE heard the door of his secretary's office open and glanced through the glass panel. Cal Meacham was coming in. He burst open the door with a breeze that ruffled the letters on Joe's desk.

"See that landing I made, Joe? Markus says I ought to be able to get my license to fly that crate in another week."

"I'll bet he added 'if you live that long.'"

"Just because you don't recognize a hot pilot when you see one—what are you so glum about, anyway? And what's happened to those condensers we ordered three days ago? This job's *hot*."

Joe held out the letter silently. Cal scanned the page swiftly and flipped it back onto the desk.

"Swell. We'll try them out. They're down in receiving, I suppose? Give me an order and I'll pick them up on my way to the lab."

"They aren't in receiving. They came in the envelope with the letter."

"What are you talking about? How could they send sixteen mikes of ten kv condensers in an envelope?"

Joe held up one of the beads by a wire—the one that passed through the outer shell without passing through it.

"This is what they sent. Guaranteed one hundred percent voltage safety factor."

Cal glanced at it. "Who's leg are you trying to pull?"

"I'm not kidding. That's what they sent."

"Well, what screwball's idea of a joke is this, then? Four mikes! Did you call receiving?"

Joe nodded. "I checked *good*. These beads are all that came."

Muttering, Cal grasped one by the lead wire and held it up to the light. He saw the faintly appearing internal structure that Joe had puzzled over.

"It *would* be funny if that's what these things actually were, wouldn't it?" he said. "Aw—it's crazy!"

"You could just about build a fifty kw transmitter in a suitcase, provided you had other corresponding components to go along."

Cal picked up the rest of the beads and dropped them in his shirt pocket. "Get another letter off right away. Better call them on the teletype instead. Tell them this job is plenty hot and we've got to have those condensers right away."

"Okay. What are you going to do with the beads?"

"I might put ten thousand volts across them and see how long it takes to melt them down. See if you can find out who pulled this gag."

Cal Meacham left for the transmitter lab. For the rest of the morning he checked over the antenna on his new set, which wasn't getting the soup out the way it should. He forgot about the glass beads completely until late in the afternoon.

As he bent his head down into the framework of the ground transmitter, one of the sharp leads of the alleged condensers stuck him through his shirt.

He jerked sharply and bumped his head on the iron framework. Cursing the refractory transmitter, the missing condensers and the practical joker who had sent the beads, he grabbed the things out of his shirt pocket and was about to hurl them across the room.

But a quirk of curiosity halted his hand in midair. Slowly he lowered it and looked again at the beads that seemed to glare at him like eyes in the palm of his hand.

He called across the lab to a junior engineer. "Hey, Max, come here. Put these things on voltage breakdown and see what happens."

"Sure." The junior engineer rolled them over in his palm. "What are they?"

"Just some gadgets we got for test. I for-

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got about them until now."

He resumed checking the transmitter. Crazy notion, that— As if the beads actually were anything but glass beads. There was only one thing that kept him from forgetting the whole matter. It was the way that one wire seemed to slide around on the bead when you looked at it—

In about five minutes Max was back. "I shot one of your gadgets all to heck. It held up until thirty-three thousand volts—and not a microamp of leakage. Whatever they are they're *good*. Want to blow the rest?"

Cal turned slowly. He wondered if Max were in on the gag too. "A few hundred volts would jump right around the glass from wire to wire without bothering to go through. Those things are supposed to be condensers but they're not that good."

"That's what the meter read. Too bad they aren't big enough to have some capacity with a voltage breakdown like that."

"Come on," said Cal. "Let's check the capacity."

First he tried another on voltage test. He watched it behind the glass shield as he advanced the voltage in steps of five kv. The bead held at thirty—and vanished at thirty-five.

His lips compressed tightly, Cal took the third bead to a standard capacity bridge. He adjusted the plugs until it balanced—at just four microfarads.

MAX'S eyes were slightly popped. "Four mikes—they *can't* be!"

"No, they can't possibly be, can they?"

Back in the purchasing office he found Joe Wilson sitting morosely at the desk, staring at a yellow strip of teletype paper.

"Just the man I'm looking for," said Joe. "I called the Continental Electric and they said—"

"I don't care what they said." Cal laid the remaining beads on the desk in front of Joe. "Those little dingwhizzits are four-mike condensers that don't break down until more than thirty thousand volts. They're everything Continental said they were and more. Where did they get them? Last time I was over there Simon Foreman was in charge of the condenser department. He never—"

"Will you let me tell you?" Joe interrupted. "They didn't come from Continental—so Continental says. They said no order for condensers has been received from here in the last six weeks. I sent a reorder by TWX."

"I don't want their order then. I want more of these!" Cal held up the bead. "But where did they come from if not from Continental?"

"That's what I want to know."

"What do you mean, you want to know? What letterhead came with these? Let's see that letter again."

"Here it is. It just says, 'Electronic Service—Unit Sixteen.' I thought that was some subsection of Continental. There's no address on it."

Cal looked intently at the sheet of paper. What Joe said was true. There was no address at all. "You're sure this came back in answer to an order you sent Continental?"

Wearily, Joe flipped over a file. "There's the duplicate of the order I sent."

"Continental always was a screwball outfit," said Cal, "but they must be trying to top themselves. Write them again. Refer to the reference on this letter. Order a gross of these condensers. While you're at it ask them for a new catalogue if ours is obsolete. I'd like to see what else they list besides these condensers."

"Okay," said Joe. "But I tell you Continental says they didn't even get our order."

"I suppose Santa Claus sent these condensers!"

Three days later Cal was still ironing the bugs out of his transmitter when Joe Wilson called again.

"Cal? Remember the Continental business? I just got the condensers—and the catalogue! For the love of Pete, get up here and take a look at it!"

"A whole gross of condensers? That's what I'm interested in."

"Yes—and billed to us for thirty cents apiece."

Cal hung up and walked out towards the Purchasing Office. Thirty cents apiece, he thought. If that outfit should go into the business of radio instruments they could probably sell a radio compass for five bucks at that rate.

He found Joe alone, an inch thick manufacturer's catalogue open on the desk in front of him.

"Did this come from Continental?" said Cal.

Joe shook his head and turned over the front cover. It merely said, *Electronic Service Unit 16.* No indication of address.

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"We send letters to Continental and stuff comes back," said Cal. "Somebody over there must know about this! What did you want? What's so exciting about the catalogue?"

Joe arched his eyebrows. "Ever hear of a catherimine tube? One with an endiom complex of plus four, which guarantees it to be the best of its kind on the market?"

"What kind of gibberish is that?"

"I dunno but this outfit sells them for sixteen dollars each." Joe tossed the catalogue across the desk. "This is absolutely the cockeyedest thing I ever saw. If you hadn't told me those beads were condensers I'd say somebody had gone to a lot of work to pull a pretty elaborate gag. But the condensers were real—and here's a hundred and forty-four more of them."

HE PICKED up a little card with the beads neatly mounted in small holes. "Somebody made these. A pretty doggoned smart somebody, I'd say—but I don't think it was Continental."

Cal was slowly thumbing through the book. Besides the gibberish describing unfamiliar pieces of electronic equipment there was something else gnawing at his mind. Then he grasped it. He rubbed a page of the catalogue between his fingers and thumb.

"Joe, this stuff isn't even paper."

"I know. Try to tear it."

Cal did. His fingers merely slipped away. "That's as tough as sheet iron!"

"That's what I found out. Whoever this Electronic Service outfit is, they've got some pretty bright engineers."

"Bright engineers! This thing reflects a whole electronic culture completely foreign to ours. If it had come from Mars it couldn't be any more foreign."

Cal thumbed over the pages, paused to read a description of a *Volterator incorporating an electron sorter based on entirely new principles*. The picture of the thing looked like a cross between a miniature hot air furnace and a backyard incinerator and it sold for six hundred dollars.

And then he came to the back of the book, which seemed to have a unity not possessed by the first half. He discovered this to be true when he came to an inner dividing cover in the center of the catalogue.

For the first time, the center cover announced, *Electronic Service—Unit 16 offers a complete line of interocitor components. In the following pages you will find complete descriptions of components which reflect the most modern engineering advances known to interocitor engineers.*

"Ever hear of an interocitor?" said Cal.

"Sounds like something a surgeon would use to remove gallstones."

"Maybe we should order a kit of parts and build one up," said Cal whimsically.

"That would be like a power engineer trying to build a high-power communications receiver from the ARRL *Amateur's Handbook* catalogue section."

"Maybe it could be done," said Cal thoughtfully. He stopped abruptly and stared down at the pages before him. "But good heavens, do you realize what this means—the extent of the knowledge and electronic culture behind this? It exists right here around us somewhere."

"Maybe some little group of engineers in a small outfit that doesn't believe in mixing and exchanging information through the IRE and so on? But are they over at Continental? If so why all the beating about the bush telling us they didn't get our order and so on?"

"It looks bigger than that," said Cal doubtfully. "Regardless, we know their mail goes through Continental."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Do? Why, I'm going to find out who they are, of course. If this is all it seems to be I'll hit them up for a job. Mind if I take this catalogue along? I'd like to use it at home tonight. I'll see you get it back in the morning. I'll probably want to order some more of this stuff just to see what happens."

"It's all right with me," said Joe. "I don't know what it's all about. I'm no engineer—just a dumb purchasing agent around this joint."

"For some things you can be thankful," said Cal.

CHAPTER II

The Tumbling Barrel

THE suburb of Mason was a small outlying place, a moderately concentrated industrial center. Besides Ryberg Instrument there were Eastern Tool and Machine Company, the Metalcrafters, a small

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die-making plant, and a stapling-machine factory.

This concentration of small industry in the suburb made for an equally concentrated social order of engineers and their families. Most of them did have families but Cal Meacham was not yet among these.

He had been a bachelor for all of his thirty-five years and it looked as if he were going to stay that way. He admitted that he got lonesome sometimes but considered it well worth it when he heard Frank Staley up at two a.m. in the apartment above his, coaxing the new baby into something resembling silence.

Cal enjoyed his engineering work with an intensity that more than compensated for any of the joys of family life he might be missing.

He ate at the company cafeteria and went home to ponder the incredible catalogue that Joe Wilson had obtained. The more he thought about the things listed and described there, the more inflamed his imagination became.

He couldn't understand how such engineering developments could have been kept quiet. And now, why were they being so prosaically announced in an ordinary manufacturer's catalogue? It made absolutely no sense whatever.

He settled down in his easy chair with the catalogue propped on his lap. The section on interocitor components held the greatest fascination for him. All the rest of the catalogue listed merely isolated components and nowhere was any other device besides the interocitor mentioned.

But there was not a single clue as to what the interocitor was, its function or its purpose. To judge from the list of components, however, and some of the sub-assemblies that were shown, it was a terrifically complex piece of equipment.

He wondered momentarily if it were some war-born apparatus that hadn't come out until now.

He picked up the latest copy of the *Amateur's Handbook* and thumbed through the catalogue section. Joe had been about right in comparing the job assembling an interocitor to that of a power engineer trying to build a radio from the ARRL catalogue. How much indication would there be to a power engineer as to the purposes of the radio components in the catalogue?

Practically none. He couldn't hope to figure out the interocitor with no more clues than a components catalogue. He gave up the speculation. He had already made up his mind to go to Continental and find out what this was all about—and maybe put in his application for a job there. He *had* to know more about this stuff.

At seven there was a knock on his door. He found Frank Staley and two other engineers from upstairs standing in the hall.

"The wives are having a gabfest," said Frank. "How about a little poker?"

"Sure, I could use a little spending money this week. But are you guys sure you can stand the loss?"

"Ha, loss, he says," said Frank. He turned to the others. "Shall we tell him how hot we are tonight, boys?"

"Let him find out the hard way," said Edmunds, one of Eastern's top mechanical engineers.

By nine-thirty Cal had found out the hard way. Even at the diminutive stakes they allowed themselves he was forty-five dollars in the hole.

He threw in his final hand. "That's all for me for tonight. You can afford to lose your lunch money for a couple of months but nobody will make mine up at home if I can't buy it at the plant."

Edmunds leaned back in his chair and laughed. "I told you we were hot tonight. You look about as glum as Peters, our purchasing agent did today. I had him order some special gears from some outfit for me a while back and they sent him two perfectly smooth wheels.

"He was about ready to hit the ceiling and then he discovered that one wheel rolled against the other would drive it. He couldn't figure it out. Neither could I when I saw it. So I mounted them on shafts and put a motor on one and a pony brake on the other.

"Believe it or not those things would transfer any horsepower I could use and I had up to three hundred and fifty. There was perfect transfer without measureable slippage or backlash, yet you could remove the keys and take the wheels off the shafts just as if there was nothing holding them together. The craziest thing you ever saw."

LIKE some familiar song in another language Edmunds' story sent a wave of almost frightening recognition through Cal. While Staley and Larsen, the third engineer, listened with polite disbelief, Cal sat in utter stillness, knowing it was all true. He

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thought of the strange catalogue over in his bookcase.

"Did you ever find out where the gears came from?" he asked.

"No, but we sure intend to. Believe me, if we can find out the secret of those wheels it's going to revolutionize the entire science of mechanical engineering. They didn't come from the place we ordered them from. We know that much. They came from some place called merely 'Mechanical Service—Unit Eight.' No address. Whoever they are they must be geniuses besides screwball business people."

Electronic Service—Unit 16, Mechanical Service—Unit 8—they must be bigger than he had supposed, Cal thought.

He went out to the little kitchenette to mix up some drinks. From the other room he heard Larsen calling Edmunds a triple-dyed liar. Two perfectly smooth wheels couldn't transmit power of that order merely by friction.

"I didn't say it was friction," Edmunds was saying. "It was something *else*—we don't know what."

Something *else*, Cal thought. Couldn't Edmunds see the significance of such wheels? They were as evident of a foreign kind of mechanical culture as the condensers were evidence of a foreign electronic culture.

He went up to the Continental plant the next day, his hopes of finding the solution there considerably dimmed. His old friend, Simon Foreman, was still in charge of the condenser development.

He showed Simon the bead and Simon said, "What kind of a gadget is that?"

"A four-mike condenser. You sent it to us. I want to know more about it." Cal watched the engineer's face closely.

Simon shook his head as he took the bead. "You're crazy! A four-mike condenser—we never sent you anything like this!"

He knew Simon was telling the truth.

It was Edmunds' story of the toothless gears that made it easier for Cal to accept the fact that the condensers and catalogue had not come from Continental. This he decided during the train ride home.

But *where* were the engineers responsible for this stuff? *Why* was it impossible to locate them? Mail reached Electronic Service through Continental. He wondered about Mechanical Service. Had Eastern received a catalogue of foreign mechanical components?

But his visit to Continental had thrown him up against a blank wall. No one admitted receiving the condenser orders and Cal knew none of Simon Foreman's men were capable of such development.

And that catalogue! It wasn't enough that it should list scores of unfamiliar components. It had to be printed on some unknown substance that resembled paper only superficially.

That was one more item that spoke not merely of isolated engineering advances but of a whole culture unfamiliar to him. And *that* was utterly impossible. Where could such a culture exist?

Regardless of the fantastic nature of the task, he had made up his mind to do what he had suggested only as a joke at first. He was going to attempt the construction of an interocitor. Somehow he felt that there would be clues to the origin of this fantastic engineering.

But *could* it be done? He'd previously dismissed it as impossible but now that it was a determined course the problem had to be analyzed further. In the catalogue were one hundred and six separate components but he knew it was not simply a matter of ordering one of each and putting them together.

That would be like ordering one tuning condenser, one coil, one tube and so on and expecting to build a super-het from them. In the interocitor there would be multiples of some parts, and different electrical values.

And, finally, if he ever got the thing working how would he know if it were performing properly or not?

He quit debating the pros and cons. He had known from the moment he first looked through the catalogue that he was going to try.

He went directly to the purchasing office instead of his lab the next morning. Through the glass panels of the outer room he could see Joe Wilson sitting at his desk with his face over a shoe box, staring with an intent and agonized frown.

Cal grinned to himself. It was hard to tell when Joe's mugging was real or not but he couldn't imagine him sitting there doing it without an audience.

CAL opened the door quietly, and then he caught a glimpse of the contents of the box. It was *wriggling*. He scowled, too.

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"What have you got now? An earthworm farm?"

Joe looked up, his face still wearing a bewildered and distant expression. "Oh, hello, Cal. This is a tumbling barrel."

Cal stared at the contents of the box. It looked like a mass of tiny black worms in perpetual erratic motion. "What's the gag this time? That box of worms doesn't look much like a tumbling barrel."

"It would—if they were metallic worms and just walked around the metal parts that needed tumbling."

"This isn't another Electronics Service—16 product, is it?"

"No. Metalcrafters sent over this sample. Wanted to know if they could sell us any for our mechanical department. The idea is that you just dump whatever needs tumbling into a box of this compound, strain it out in a few minutes and your polishing job is done."

"What makes the stuff wiggle?"

"That's the secret that Metalcrafters won't tell."

"Order five hundred pounds of it," said Cal suddenly. "Call them on the phone and tell them we can use it this afternoon."

"What's the big idea? *You* can't use it."

"Try it."

Dubiously, Joe lifted the phone and contacted the order department of the Metalcrafters. He placed the order. After a moment he hung up. "They say that due to unexpected technological difficulties in production they are not accepting orders for earlier than thirty day delivery."

"The crazy dopes! They won't get it in thirty days or thirty months."

"What are you talking about?"

"Where do you think they got this stuff? They didn't discover it. They got it the same way we got these condensers and they're hoping to cash in on it before they even know what it is. As if they could figure it out in thirty days!"

Then he told Joe about the gears of Edmunds.

"This begins to look like more than accident," said Joe.

Cal nodded slowly. "Sample of products of an incredible technology were apparently missent to three of the industrial plants here in Mason. But I wonder how many times it has happened in other places. It almost looks like a deliberate pattern of some sort."

"But who's sending it all and how and why? Who developed this stuff? It couldn't be done on a shoestring, you know. That stuff smells of big money spent in development labs. Those condensers must have cost a half million, I'll bet."

"Make out an order for me," said Cal. "Charge it to my project. There's enough surplus to stand it. I'll take the rap if anybody snoops."

"What do you want?"

"Send it to Continental as before. Just say you want one complete set of components as required for the construction of a single interocitor model. That may get me the right number of duplicate parts unless I get crossed up by something I'm not thinking of."

Joe's eyebrows shot up. "You're going to try to build one by the Chinese method?"

"The Chinese method would be simple," Cal grunted. "They take a finished cake and reconstruct it. If I had a finished interocitor I'd gladly tackle *that*. This is going to be built by the Cal Meacham original catalogue method."

He worked overtime for the next couple of days to beat out the bugs in the airline ground transmitter and finally turned it over to the production department for processing. There'd still be a lot of work on it because production wouldn't like some of the complex sub-assemblies he'd been forced to design—but he'd have time for the interocitor stuff if and when it showed up.

After two weeks he was almost certain that something had gone wrong and they had lost contact with the mysterious supplier. His disappointment vanished when the receiving clerk called him and said that fourteen crates had just been received for him.

Fourteen crates seemed a reasonable number but he hadn't been prepared for the size of them. They stood seven feet high and were no smaller than four by five feet in cross section.

Cal groaned as he saw them standing on the receiving platform. He visioned cost sheets with astronomical figures on them. What had he got himself into?

He cleared out one of his screen rooms and ordered the stuff brought in. Then he began the job of unpacking the crates as they were slowly dollied in. He noted with some degree of relief that approximately one half the volume of the crates was taken up by packing materials—but that still left an enormous volume of components.

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In some attempt to classify them he laid the like units together upon the benches around the room. There were plumbing units of seemingly senseless configuration, glass envelopes with innards that looked like nothing he had ever seen in a vacuum tube before. There were boxes containing hundreds of small parts which he supposed must be resistances or condensers—though his memory concerning the glass beads made him cautious about jumping to conclusions regarding anything.

After three hours, the last of the crates had been unpacked and the rubbish carted away. Cal Meacham was left alone in the midst of four thousand, eight hundred and ninety-six—he'd kept a tally of them—unfamiliar gadgets of unknown purposes and characteristics. And he hoped to assemble them into a complete whole—of equally unknown purposes.

He sat down on a lab stool and regarded the stacks of components glumly. In his lap rested the single guide through this impossible maze—the catalogue.

CHAPTER III

Assembly Problem

AT QUITTING time he went out for dinner at the plant cafeteria, then returned to the now empty lab and walked around the piles, sizing up the job he'd let himself in for. It would take all his nights for months to come.

He hoped there wouldn't be too much curiosity about his project but he could see little chance of keeping it entirely under cover. Most of all he was concerned with keeping Billingsworth, the chief engineer, from complaining about it. Not that he and Billingsworth weren't on good terms but this was *big* for a sideline project.

It was obvious that certain parts of the miscellaneous collection constituted a framework for the assembly to be mounted on. He gathered these together and set them up tentatively to see if he could get some idea of the size and shape of the finished assembly.

One thing stood out at once. On the bench was a cube of glass, sixteen inches on a side, filled with a complex mass of elements. Twenty-three terminals led from the elements to the outside of the cube. One side of it was coated as if it were some kind of screen. And within one of the framework panels there was an opening exactly the right size to accommodate the face of the cube.

That narrowed the utility of the device, Cal thought. It provided an observer with some kind of intelligence which was viewed in graphic or pictorial form as with a cathode-ray tube.

But the complexity of the cube's elements and the multiple leads indicated another necessity. He would have to order duplicates of many parts because these would have to be dissected to destruction in order to determine some possible electrical function.

Nearly all the tubes fell into this classification and he began listing these parts so that Joe could reorder.

He then turned to familiarizing himself with the catalogue name of each part and establishing possible functions from the descriptions and specifications given.

Slowly through the early morning hours the clues increased. Pieces were fitted together as if the whole thing were a majestic jigsaw puzzle designed by some super-brain.

At three a.m. Cal locked the screen room and went home for a few hours' sleep. He felt elated by the slight success he'd had, the few clues that he seemed to have discovered.

He was in at eight again and went to Joe's office. As always Joe was there. Cal sometimes wondered if he slept in the place.

"I see your stuff came," said Joe. "I wanted to come down, but I thought you'd like to work it out alone for a while."

"I wish you had," Cal said. He understood Joe's frustrations. "Come on down anytime. There's something I'd like you to do. On the crates the stuff came in there was an address of a warehouse in Philadelphia. I wrote it down here. Could you get one of the salesmen to see what kind of a place it is when he's through there? I'd rather not have him know I'm interested. This may be a lead."

"Sure. I think the Sales Office has a regular trip through there next week. I'll see who's on it. What have you found out?"

"Not too much. The thing has a screen for viewing but no clue as to what might be viewed. There's a piece of equipment referred to as a *planetary generator* that seems to be a sort of central unit, something like the

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oscillator of a transmitter, perhaps. It was mounted in a support that seems to call for mounting on the main frame members.

"This gives me an important dimension so I can finish the framework. But there's about four hundred and ninety terminals—more or less—on that planetary generator. That's what's got me buffaloed but good. These parts seem to be interchangeable in different circuits, otherwise they might be marked for wiring.

"The catalogue refers to various elements, which are named, and gives electrical values for them—but I can't find out which elements are which without tearing into sealed units. So here's a reorder on all the parts I may have to open up."

Joe glanced at it. "Know what that first shipment cost?"

"Don't tell me it cleaned my project out?"

"They billed us this morning for twenty-eight hundred dollars."

Cal whistled softly. "If that stuff had been produced by any of the technological methods I know anything about they would have sent a bill nearer twenty-eight thousand."

"Say, Cal, why can't we track this outfit down through the patent office. There must be patents on the stuff."

"There's not a patent number on anything. I've already looked."

"Then let's ask them to send us either the number or copies of the patents on some of these things. They wouldn't distribute unpatented items like this, surely. They'd be worth a fortune."

"All right. Put it in the letter with your reorder. I don't think it will do much good."

CAL returned to the lab and worked impatiently through the morning on consultations with the production department regarding his transmitter. After lunch he returned to the interocitor. He decided against opening any of the tubes. If anything should happen to their precarious contact with the supplier before they located him—

He began work on identification of the tube elements. Fortunately the catalogue writers had put in all voltage and current data. But there were new units that made no sense to Cal—*albion factors, inverse reduction index, scattering efficiency.*

Slowly he went ahead. Filaments were easy but some of the tubes had nothing resembling filaments or cathodes. When he applied test voltages he didn't know whether anything was happening or not.

Gradually he found out. There was one casual sketch showing a catherimine tube inside a field-generating coil. That gave him a clue to a whole new principle of operation.

After six days he was able to connect proper voltages to more than half his tubes and get the correct responses as indicated by catalogue specifications. With that much information available he was able to go ahead and construct the entire power supply of the interocitor.

Then Joe called him one afternoon. "Hey, Cal! Have you busted any of those tubes yet?"

"No. Why?"

"Don't! They're getting mad or something. They aren't going to send the reorder we asked for and they say there are no patents on the stuff. Besides, that address in Philadelphia turned out to be a dud.

"Cramer, the salesman who looked it up, says there's nothing there but an old warehouse that hasn't been used for years. Cal, who can these guys be? I'm beginning to not like the smell of this business."

"Read me their letter."

" 'Dear Mr. Wilson,' they say, 'We cannot understand the necessity of the large amount of reorder which you have submitted to us. We trust that the equipment was not broken or damaged in transit. However, if this is the case please return the damaged parts and we will gladly order replacements for you. Otherwise we fear that, due to the present shortage of interocitor equipment, it will be necessary to return your order unfilled.

" 'We do not understand your reference to patents. There is nothing of such a nature in connection with the equipment. Please feel free to call upon us at any time. If you find it possible to function under present circumstances will you please contact us by interocitor at your earliest convenience and we will discuss the matter further.' "

"What was that last line?" Cal asked.

"— 'contact us by interocitor—' "

"That's the one! That shows us what the apparatus is—a communication device."

"But from where to where and from whom to whom?"

"That's what I intend to find out. Believe me I do—now as never before!"

They weren't going to let him open up the tubes or other sealed parts, that was obvious. Cal arranged for an X-ray and fluoroscope

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equipment and began to obtain some notion of the interior construction of the tubes he could not otherwise analyze. He could trace the terminals back to their internal connections and be fairly sure of not burning things up with improper voltages to the elements.

Besides the power supply the entire framework with the planetary generator was erected and a bank of eighteen catherimine tubes was fed by it. The output of these went to a nightmare arrangement of plumbing that included unbelievable flares and spirals. Again he found prealigned mounting holes that enabled him to fit most of the plumbing together with only casual reference to the catalogue.

Growing within him was the feeling that the whole thing was some incredible intricately designed puzzle and that clues were deliberately placed there for anyone who would look.

Then one of the catherimine tubes rolled off a table and shattered on the floor. Cal thought afterwards that he must have stood staring at the shards of glass for a full five minutes before he moved. He wondered if the whole project were lying there in that shattered heap.

GENTLY, with tweezers, he picked out the complex tube elements and laid them gently on a bed of dustless packing material. Then he called Joe.

"Get off another letter to Continental—airmail," he said. "Ask if we can get a catherimine replacement. I just dropped one."

"Aren't you going to send the pieces along as they asked?"

"No. I'm not taking any chances with what I've got. Tell them the remains will be forwarded immediately if they can send a replacement."

"O.K. Mind if I come down tonight and look things over?"

"Not at all. Come on down."

It was a little before five when Joe Wilson finally entered the screen room. He looked around and whistled softly. "Looks like you're making something out of this after all."

A neat row of panels nearly fifteen feet long stretched along the center of the room. In the framework behind was a nightmarish assemblage of gadgets and leads. Joe took in the significance of the hundreds of leads that were in place.

"You're really figuring it out!"

"I think so," said Cal casually. "It's pretty tricky."

Joe scanned the mass of equipment once more. "You know, manufacturers' catalogues are my line," he said. "I see hundreds of them every year. I get so I can almost tell the inside layout just by the cover.

"Catalogue writers aren't very smart, you know. They're mostly forty-fifty-dollar-a-week kids that come out of college with a smattering of journalism but are too dumb to do much about it. So they end up writing catalogues.

"And no catalogue I ever saw would enable you to do this!"

Cal shrugged. "You never saw a catalogue like this before."

"I don't think it's a catalogue."

"What do you think it is?"

"An instruction book. Somebody wanted you to put this together."

Cal laughed heartily. "You must read too much science fiction on your days off. Why would anyone deliberately plant this stuff so that I would assemble it?"

"Do *you* think it's just a catalogue?"

Cal stopped laughing. "All right, you win. I'll admit it but I still think it's crazy. There are things in it that wouldn't be quite necessary if it were only a catalogue. For instance, look at this catherimine tube listing.

"It says that with the deflector grid in a four-thousand-gauss field the accelerator plate current will be forty mils. Well, it doesn't matter whether it's in a field or not. That's normal for the element under any conditions.

"But that's the only place in the whole book that indicates the normal operation of the tube is in this particular field. There were a bunch of coils with no designation except that they are static field coils.

"On the basis on that one clue I put the tubes and coils together and found an explanation of the unknown 'albion factor' that I've been looking for. It's that way all along. It can't be merely accidental. You're right about catalogue and technical writers in general but the guy that cooked this one up was a genius.

"Yet I still can't quite force myself to the conclusion that I was *supposed* to put this thing togther, that I was deliberately led into it."

"Couldn't it be some sort of Trojan Horse gadget?"

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"I don't see how it could be. What could it do? As a radiation weapon it wouldn't have a very wide range—I hope."

Joe turned towards the door. "Maybe it's just as well that you broke that tube."

The pile of components whose places in the assembly still were to be determined was astonishingly small, Cal thought, as he left the lab shortly after midnight.

Many of the circuits were complete and had been tested, with a response that might or might not be adequate for their design. At least nothing blew up.

The following afternoon, Joe called again. "We've lost our connection. I just got a TWX from Continental. They want to know what the devil we're talking about in our letter of yesterday—the one asking for a replacement."

There was only a long silence.

"Cal—you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here. Get hold of Oceanic Tube Company for me. Ask them to send one of their best engineers down here—Jerry Lanier if he's in the plant now. We'll see if they can rebuild the tube for us."

"That *is* going to cost money."

"I'll pay it out of my own pocket if I have to. This thing is almost finished."

WHY had they cut their connection, Cal wondered? Had they discovered that their contact had been a mistake? And what would happen if he did finish the interocitor? He wondered if there would be anyone to communicate with even if he did complete it.

It was so close to completion now that he was beginning to suffer from the customary engineer's jitters that come when a harebrained scheme is finally about to be tested. Only this was about a thousand times worse because he didn't even know that he would recognize the correct operation of the interocitor if he saw it.

It was ninety-eight-percent complete and he still could detect no coherency in the thing. It seemed to turn completely in upon itself. True, there was a massive source of radiation but it seemed to be entirely dissipated within the instrument. There was no part that could conceivably act as an antenna to radiate or collect radiation and so provide means of communication.

Cal went over his circuit deductions again and again but the more he tracked down the available clues, the more certain it seemed that he had built correctly. There was no ambiguity whatever in the cleverly buried clues.

Jerry Lanier finally showed up. Cal gave him only the broken catherimine tube and allowed him to see none of the rest of the equipment.

Jerry scowled at the tube. "Since when did they put squirrel cages in glass envelopes? What is this thing?"

"Top hush-hush," said Cal. "All I want to know is can you duplicate it?"

"Sure. Where did you get it?"

"Military secret."

"It looks simple enough. We could probably duplicate it in three weeks or so."

"Look, Larry, I want that bottle in three days."

"Cal, you know we can't—"

"Oceanic isn't the only tube maker in the business. This might turn out to be pretty hot stuff."

"All right, you horse trader. Guarantee it by air express in five days."

"Good enough."

For two straight nights Cal didn't go home. He grabbed a half hour's snooze on a lab bench in the early morning. And on the second day he was almost caught by the first lab technician who arrived.

But the interocitor was finished.

The realization seemed more like a dream than reality but every one of the nearly five thousand parts had at last been incorporated into the assembly behind the panels—except the broken tube.

He knew it was right. With a nearly obsessive conviction he felt sure that he had constructed the interocitor just as the unknown engineers had designed it.

He locked the screen room and left word with Joe to call him if Jerry sent the tube, then went home to sleep the clock around.

When he finally went back to the lab a dozen production problems on the airline transmitter had turned up and for once he was thankful for them. They helped reduce the tension of waiting to find out what the assembly of alien parts would do when he finally turned on the power to the whole unit.

He was still working on the job of breaking down one of the transmitter sub-assemblies when quitting time came. It was only because Nell Joy, the receptionist in the front hall, was waiting for her boy friend that he received the package at all.

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She called him at twenty after five.

"Mr. Meacham? I didn't know whether you'd still be here or not. There's a special-delivery boy here with a package for you. It looks important. Do you want it tonight?"

"I'll say I do!"

He was out by her desk, signing for the package, almost before she had hung up. He tore off the wrappings on the way back to the lab.

CHAPTER IV

Contact!

THERE it was!

As beautiful a job of duplication as he could have wished for. Cal could have sworn there was no visual difference between it and the original. But the electrical test would tell the story.

In the lab he put the duplicate tube in the tester he'd devised and checked the albion. That was the critical factor.

He frowned as the meter indicated ten per-cent deviation, but two of the originals had tolerances that great. It would do.

His hand didn't seem quite steady as he put the tube in its socket. He stood back a moment, viewing the completed instrument.

Then he plunged the master switch on the power panel.

He watched anxiously the flickering hands of two-score meters as he advanced along the panels, energizing the circuits one by one.

Intricate adjustments on the panel controls brought the meter readings into line with the catalogue specifications which he had practically memorized by now—but which were written by the meters for safety.

Then, slowly, the grayish screen of the cubical viewing tube brightened. Waves of polychrome hue washed over it. It seemed as if an image were trying to form but it remained out of focus, only a wash of color.

"Turn up the intensifier knob," a masculine voice said suddenly. "That will clear your screen."

To Cal it was like words coming suddenly at midnight in a ghost-ridden house. The sound had come out of the utter unknown into which the interocitor reached—but it was human.

He stepped back to the panel and adjusted the knob. The shapeless color flowed to solid lines, congealed to an image. And Cal stared.

He didn't know what he had expected. But the prosaic color-image of the man who watched him from the plate was too ordinary after the weeks-long effort expended on the interocitor.

Yet there was something of the unknown in the man's eyes too—something akin to the unknown of the interocitor. Cal drew slowly nearer the plate, his eyes unable to leave that face, his breath hard and fast.

"Who are you?" he said almost inaudibly. "What have I built?"

For a moment the man made no answer as if he hadn't heard. His image was stately and he appeared of uncertain late middle age. He was of large proportions and ruggedly attractive of feature. But it was his eyes that held Cal with such intense force—eyes which seemed to hold an awareness of responsibility to all the people in the world.

"Who are you?" Cal repeated softly.

"We'd about given you up," the man said at last. "But you've passed. And rather well too."

"Who are you? What is this—this interocitor I've constructed?"

"The interocitor is simply an instrument of communication. Constructing it was a good deal more. You'll follow my meaning in a moment. Your first question is more difficult to answer but that is my purpose.

"I am the employment representative of a group—a certain group who are urgently in need of men, expert technologists. We have a good many stringent requirements for prospective employees. So we require them to take an aptitude test to measure some of those qualifications we desire.

"You have passed that test!"

For a moment Cal stared uncomprehendingly. "What do you mean? This makes no sense. I have made no application to work with your—your employers."

A FAINT trace of a smile crossed the man's face. "No. No one does that. We pick our own applicants and test them, quite without their awareness they are being tested. You are to be congratulated on your showing."

"What makes you think I'd be interested in working for your employers? I don't even know who they are, let alone what work they require done."

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"You would not have come this far unless you were interested in the job we have to offer."

"I don't understand."

"You have seen the type of technology in our possession. No matter who or what we are, having come this far you would pursue us to the ends of the Earth to find out how we came by that technology and to learn its mastery for yourself. Is it not so?"

The arrogant truth of the man's statement was like a physical blow that rocked Cal back on his heels. There was no uncertainty in the man's voice. He *knew* what Cal was going to do more surely than Cal had known himself up to this moment.

"You seem pretty certain of that." Cal found it hard to keep an impulsive hostility out of his voice.

"I am. We pick our applicants quite carefully. We make offers only to those we are certain will accept. Now, since you are about to join us, I will relieve your mind of some unnecessary tensions.

"It has undoubtedly occurred to you, as to all thinking people of your day, that the scientists have done a particularly abominable job of dispensing the tools they have devised. Like careless and indifferent workmen they have tossed the products of their craft to gibbering apes and baboons. The results have been disastrous to say the least.

"Not all scientists, however, have been quite so indifferent. There are a group of us who have formed an organization for the purpose of obtaining better and more conservative distribution of these tools. We call ourselves, somewhat dramatically perhaps, but none the less truthfully, *Peace Engineers.* Our motives are sure to encompass whatever implications you can honestly make of the term.

"But we need men—technicians, men of imagination, men of good will, men of superb engineering abilities—and our method has to be somewhat less than direct. Hence, our approach to you. It involved simply an interception of mail in a manner you would not yet understand.

"You passed your aptitude test and so were more successful than some of your fellow engineers in this community."

Cal thought instantly of Edmunds and the toothless gears and the tumbling barrel compound.

"Those other things—" he said. "They would have led to the same solution?"

"Yes. In a somewhat different way, of course. But that is all the information I can give you at this time. The next consideration is your coming here."

"*Where?* Where are you? How do I come?"

The readiness with which his mind accepted the fact of his going shocked and chilled him. Was there no other alternative that he should consider? For what reasons should he ally himself with this unknown band who called themselves *Peace Engineers?* He fought for rational reasons why he should not.

There were few that he could muster up. None, actually. He was alone, without family or obligations. He had no particular professional ties to prevent him from leaving.

As for any potential personal threat that might lie in alliance with the *Peace Engineers* —well, he wasn't much afraid of anything that could happen to him personally.

But in reality none of these factors had any influence. There was only one thing that concerned him. He had to know more about that fantastic technology they possessed.

And they had known that was the one factor capable of drawing him.

The interviewer paused as if sensing what was in Cal's mind. "You will learn the answers to all your questions in proper order," he said. "Can you be ready tomorrow?"

"I'm ready now," Cal said.

"Tomorrow will be soon enough. Our plane will land on your airfield exactly at noon. It will remain fifteen minutes. It will take off without you if you are not in it by that time. You will know it by its color. A black ship with a single horizontal orange stripe, an Army BT-13 type.

"That is all for now. Congratulations and good luck to you. I'll be looking forward to seeing you personally.

"Stand back now. When I cut off the interocitor will be destroyed. Stand back!"

Cal backed sharply to the far side of the room. He saw the man's head nod, his face smiling a pleasant good-by, then the image vanished from the screen.

Almost instantly there came the hiss of burning insulation, the crack of heat-shattered glass. From the framework of the interocitor rose a blooming bubble of smoke that slowly filled the room as wires melted and insulation became molten and ran.

Cal burst from the screen room and

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grasped a nearby fire extinguisher, which he played into the blinding smoke pouring from the room. He emptied that one and ran for another.

Slowly the heat and smoke dispelled. He moved back into the room and knew then that the interocitor could never be analyzed or duplicated from that ruin. Its destruction had been thorough.

IT WAS useless trying to sleep that night. He sat in the park until after midnight when a suspicious cop chased him off. After that he simply walked the streets until dawn, trying to fathom the implications of what he'd seen and heard.

Peace Engineers—

What did the term mean? It could imply a thousand things, a secret group with dictatorial ambitions in possession of a powerful technology—a bunch of crackpots with strange access to genius—or it could be what the term literally implied.

But there was no guarantee that their purposes were altruistic. With his past knowledge of human nature he was more inclined to credit the possibility that he was being led into some Sax Rhomer melodrama.

At dawn he turned towards his apartment. There he cleaned up and had breakfast and left the rent and a note instructing the landlord to dispose of his belongings as he wished. He went to the plant in midmorning and resigned amidst a storm of protests from Billingsworth and a forty-percent salary increase offer.

That done, it was nearly noon and he went up to see Joe Wilson.

"I wondered what happened to you this morning," said Joe. "I tried to call you for a couple of hours."

"I slept late," said Cal. "I just came in to resign."

"Resign?" Joe Wilson stared incredulously. "What for? What about the interocitor?"

"It blew up in my face. The whole thing's gone."

"I hoped you would make it," Joe said a little sadly. "I wonder if we will ever find out where that stuff came from."

"Sure," said Cal carelessly. "It was just some shipping mixup. We'll find out about it someday."

"Cal—" Joe Wilson was looking directly into his face. "You found out, didn't you?"

Cal hesitated a moment. He had been put under no bond of secrecy. What could it matter? He understood something of the fascination the problem held for a frustrated engineer turned into a technical purchasing agent.

"Yes," he said. "I found out."

Joe smiled wryly. "I was hoping you would. Can you tell me about it?"

"There's nothing to tell. I don't know where they are. All I know is that I talked to someone. They offered me a job."

There it was. He saw it coming in low and fast, a black and orange ship. Wing flaps down, it slowed and touched the runway. Already it was like the symbol of a vast and important future that had swept him up. Already the familiar surroundings of Ryberg's were something out of a dim and unimportant past.

"I wish we could have learned more about the interocitor," said Joe.

Cal's eyes were still straining towards the ship as it taxied around on the field. Then he shook hands solemnly with Joe. "You and me both," he said. "Believe me—"

Joe Wilson stood by the window and as Cal went out towards the ship he knew he'd been correct in that glimpse he'd got of the cockpit canopy silhouetted against the sky.

The ship was pilotless.

Another whispering clue to a mighty, alien technology.

He knew Cal must have seen it too but Cal's steps were steady as he walked towards it.

●

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE LION OF COMARRE

A Novelet of the Quest for a Dream-City

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

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It looked like a mouse —but there were little differences

MOUSE

By FREDRIC BROWN

The spaceship from Somewhere carried strange cargo!

BILL WHEELER was, as it happened, looking out of the window of his bachelor apartment on the fifth floor on the corner of 83rd Street and Central Park West when the spaceship from Somewhere landed.

It floated gently down out of the sky and came to rest in Central Park on the open grass between the Simon Bolivar Monument and the walk, barely a hundred yards from Bill Wheeler's window.

Bill Wheeler's hand paused in stroking the soft fur of the Siamese cat lying on the windowsill and he said wonderingly, "What's that, Beautiful?" but the Siamese cat didn't answer. She stopped purring, though, when Bill stopped stroking her. She must have felt something different in Bill—possibly from the sudden rigidness in his fingers or possibly because cats are prescient and feel changes of mood. Anyway she rolled over on her back and said, "Miaouw," quite plaintively. But Bill, for once, didn't answer her. He was too engrossed in the incredible thing across the street in the park.

It was cigar-shaped, about seven feet long

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and two feet in diameter at the thickest point. As far as size was concerned, it might have been a large toy model dirigible, but it never occurred to Bill—even at his first glimpse of it when it was about fifty feet in the air, just opposite his window—that it might be a toy or a model.

There was something about it, even at the most casual look, that said *alien*. You couldn't put your finger on what it was. Anyway, alien or terrestrial, it had no visible means of support. No wings, propellers, rocket tubes or anything else—and it was made of metal and obviously heavier than air.

But it floated down like a feather to a point just about a foot above the grass. It stopped there and suddenly, out of one end of it (both ends were so nearly alike that you couldn't say it was the front or back) came a flash of fire that was almost blinding. There was a hissing sound with the flash and the cat under Bill Wheeler's hand turned over and was on her feet in a single lithe movement, looking out of the window. She spat once, softly, and the hairs on her back and the back of her neck stood straight up, as did her tail, which was now a full two inches thick.

Bill didn't touch her; if you know cats you don't when they're like that. But he said, "Quiet, Beautiful. It's all right. It's only a spaceship from Mars, to conquer Earth. It isn't a mouse."

HE WAS right on the first count, in a way. He was wrong on the second, in a way. But let's not get ahead of ourselves like that.

After the single blast from its exhaust tube or whatever it was the spaceship dropped the last twelve inches and lay inert on the grass. It didn't move. There was now a fan-shaped area of blackened earth radiating from one end of it, for a distance of about thirty feet.

And then nothing happened except that people came running from several directions. Cops came running, too, three of them, and kept people from going too close to the alien object. Too close, according to the cops' idea, seemed to be closer than about ten feet. Which, Bill Wheeler thought, was silly. If the thing was going to explode or anything, it would probably kill everyone for blocks around.

But it didn't explode. It just lay there, and nothing happened. Nothing except that flash that had startled both Bill and the cat. And the cat looked bored now, and lay back down on the windowsill, her hackles down.

Bill stroked her sleek fawn-colored fur again, absent-mindedly. He said, "This is a day, Beautiful. That thing out there is from *outside*, or I'm a spider's nephew. I'm going down and take a look at it."

He took the elevator down. He got as far as the front door, tried to open it, and couldn't. All he could see through the glass was the backs of people, jammed tight against the door. Standing on tiptoes and stretching his neck to see over the nearest ones, he could see a solid phalanx of heads stretching from here to there.

He got back in the elevator. The operator said, "Sounds like excitement out front. Parade going by or something?"

"Something," Bill said. "Spaceship just landed in Central Park, from Mars or somewhere. You hear the welcoming committee out there."

"The hell," said the operator. "What's it doing?"

"Nothing."

The operator grinned. "You're a great kidder, Mr. Wheeler. How's that cat you got?"

"Fine," said Bill. "How's yours?"

"Getting crankier. Threw a book at me when I got home last night with a few under my belt and lectured me half the night because I'd spent three and a half bucks. You got the best kind."

"I think so," Bill said.

By the time he got back to the window, there was really a crowd down there. Central Park West was solid with people for half a block each way and the park was solid with them for a long way back. The only open area was a circle around the spaceship, now expanded to about twenty feet in radius, and with a lot of cops keeping it open instead of only three.

Bill Wheeler gently moved the Siamese over to one side of the windowsill and sat down. He said, "We got a box seat, Beautiful. I should have had more sense than to go down there."

The cops below were having a tough time. But reinforcements were coming, truckloads of them. They fought their way into the circle and then helped enlarge it. Somebody had obviously decided that the larger that circle was the fewer people were going to be killed. A few khaki uniforms

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had infiltrated the circle, too.

"Brass," Bill told the cat. "High brass. I can't make out insignia from here, but that one boy's at least a three-star; you can tell by the way he walks."

They got the circle pushed back to the sidewalk, finally. There was a lot of brass inside by then. And half a dozen men, some in uniform, some not, were starting, very carefully, to work on the ship. Photographs first, and then measurements, and then one man with a big suitcase of paraphernalia was carefully scratching at the metal and making tests of some kind.

"A metallurgist, Beautiful," Bill Wheeler explained to the Siamese, who wasn't watching at all. "And I'll bet you ten pounds of liver to one miaouw he finds that's an alloy that's brand new to him. And that it's got some stuff in it he can't identify.

"You really ought to be looking out, Beautiful, instead of lying there like a dope. This is a *day*, Beautiful. This may be the beginning of the end—or of something new. I wish they'd hurry up and get it open."

ARMY trucks were coming into the circle now. Half a dozen big planes were circling overhead, making a lot of noise. Bill looked up at them quizzically.

"Bombers, I'll bet, with pay loads. Don't know what they have in mind unless to bomb the park, people and all, if little green men come out of that thing with ray guns and start killing everybody. Then the bombers could finish off whoever's left."

But no little green men came out of the cylinder. The men working on it couldn't apparently, find an opening in it. They'd rolled it over now and exposed the under side, but the under side was the same as the top. For all they could tell, the under side *was* the top.

And then Bill Wheeler swore. The army trucks were being unloaded, and sections of a big tent were coming out of them, and men in khaki were driving stakes and unrolling canvas.

"They *would* do something like that, Beautiful," Bill complained bitterly. "Be bad enough if they hauled it off, but to leave it there to work on and still to block off our view—"

The tent went up. Bill Wheeler watched the top of the tent, but nothing happened to the top of the tent and whatever went on inside he couldn't see. Trucks came and went, high brass and civvies came and went.

And after a while the phone rang. Bill gave a last affectionate rumple to the cat's fur and went to answer it.

"Bill Wheeler?" the receiver asked. "This is General Kelly speaking. Your name has been given to me as a competent research biologist. Tops in your field. Is that correct?"

"Well," Bill said. "I'm a research biologist. It would be hardly modest for me to say I'm tops in my field. What's up?"

"A spaceship has just landed in Central Park."

"You don't say," said Bill.

"I'm calling from the field of operations; we've run phones in here, and we're gathering specialists. We would like you and some other biologists to examine something that was found inside the—uh—spaceship. Grimm of Harvard was in town and will be here and Winslow of New York University is already here. It's opposite Eighty-third Street. How long would it take you to get here?"

"About ten seconds, if I had a parachute. I've been watching you out of my window." He gave the address and the apartment number. "If you can spare a couple of strong boys in imposing uniforms to get me through the crowd, it'll be quicker than if I try it myself. Okay?"

"Right. Send 'em right over. Sit tight."

"Good," said Bill. "*What* did you find inside the cylinder?"

There was a second's hesitation. Then the voice said, "Wait till you get here."

"I've got instruments," Bill said. "Dissecting equipment. Chemicals. Reagents. I want to know what to bring. Is it a little green man?"

"No," said the voice. After a second's hesitation again, it said, "It seems to be a mouse. A dead mouse."

"Thanks," said Bill. He put down the receiver and walked back to the window. He looked at the Siamese cat accusingly. "Beautiful," he demanded, "was somebody ribbing me, or—"

There was a puzzled frown on his face as he watched the scene across the street. Two policemen came hurrying out of the tent and headed directly for the entrance of his apartment building. They began to work their way through the crowd.

"Fan me with a blowtorch, Beautiful," Bill said. "It's the McCoy." He went to

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the closet and grabbed a valise, hurried to a cabinet and began to stuff instruments and bottles into the valise. He was ready by the time there was a knock on the door.

He said, "Hold the fort, Beautiful. Got to see a man about a mouse." He joined the policemen waiting outside his door and was escorted through the crowd and into the circle of the elect and into the tent.

THERE was a crowd around the spot where the cylinder lay. Bill peered over shoulders and saw that the cylinder was neatly split in half. The inside was hollow and padded with something that looked like fine leather, but softer. A man kneeling at one end of it was talking.

"—not a trace of any activating mechanism, any mechanism at *all*, in fact. Not a wire, not a grain or a drop of any fuel. Just a hollow cylinder, padded inside. Gentlemen, it *couldn't* have traveled by its own power in any conceivable way. But it came here, and from outside. Gravesend says the material is definitely extra-terrestrial. Gentlemen, I'm stumped."

Another voice said, "I've an idea, Major." It was the voice of the man over whose shoulder Bill Wheeler was leaning and Bill recognized the voice and the man with a start. It was the President of the United States. Bill quit leaning on him.

"I'm no scientist," the President said. "And this is just a possibility. Remember the one blast, out of that single exhaust hole? That might have been the destruction, the dissipation of whatever the mechanism or the propellant was. Whoever, whatever, sent or guided this contraption might not have wanted us to find out what made it run. It was constructed, in that case, so that, upon landing, the mechanism destroyed itself utterly. Colonel Roberts, you examined that scorched area of ground. Anything that might bear out that theory?"

"Definitely, sir," said another voice. "Traces of metal and silica and some carbon, as though it had been vaporized by terrific heat and then condensed and uniformly spread. You can't find a chunk of it to pick up, but the instruments indicate it. Another thing—"

Someone tapped Bill Wheeler on the shoulder. "You're Wheeler, aren't you?"

Bill turned. "Professor Winslow!" he said. "I've seen your picture, sir, and I've read your papers in the Journal. I'm proud to meet you and to—"

"Cut the malarkey," said Professor Winslow, "and take a gander at this." He grabbed Bill Wheeler by the arm and led him to a table in one corner of the tent.

"Looks for all the world like a dead mouse," he said, "but it isn't. Not quite. I haven't cut in yet; waited for you and Grimm. But I've taken temperature tests and had hairs under the mike and studied musculature. It's—well, look for yourself."

Bill Wheeler looked. It looked like a mouse all right, a very small mouse, until you looked closely. Then you saw little differences, if you were a biologist.

Grimm got there and—delicately, reverently—they cut in. The differences stopped being little ones and became big ones. The bones didn't seem to be made of bone, for one thing, and they were bright yellow instead of white. The digestive system wasn't too far off the beam, and there was a circulatory system and a white milky fluid in it, but there wasn't any heart. There were, instead, nodes at regular intervals along the larger tubes.

"Way stations," Grimm said. "No central pump. You might call it a lot of little hearts instead of one big one. Efficient, I'd say. Creature built like this couldn't have heart trouble. Here, let me put some of that white fluid on a slide."

Someone was leaning over Bill's shoulder, putting uncomfortable weight on him. He turned his head to tell the man to get the hell away and saw it was the President of the United States. "Out of this world?" the President asked quietly.

"And how," said Bill. A second later he added, "Sir," and the President chuckled. He asked, "Would you say it's been dead long or that it died about the time of arrival?"

Winslow answered that one. "It's purely a guess, Mr. President, because we don't know the chemical make-up of the thing, or what its normal temperature is. But a rectal thermometer reading twenty minutes ago, when I got here, was ninety-five three and one minute ago it was ninety point six. At that rate of heat loss, it couldn't have been dead long."

"Would you say it was an intelligent creature?"

"I wouldn't say for sure, Sir. It's too alien. But I'd guess—definitely no. No more so than its terrestrial counterpart, a mouse."

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Brain size and convolutions are quite similar."

"You don't think it could, conceivably, have designed that ship?"

"I'd bet a million to one against it, Sir."

IT HAD been mid-afternoon when the spaceship had landed; it was almost midnight when Bill Wheeler started home. Not from across the street, but from the lab at New York U., where the dissection and microscopic examinations had continued.

He walked home in a daze, but he remembered guiltily that the Siamese hadn't been fed, and hurried as much as he could for the last block.

She looked at him reproachfully and said "Miaouw, miaouw, miaouw, miaouw—" so fast he couldn't get a word in edgewise until she was eating some liver out of the icebox.

"Sorry, Beautiful," he said then. "Sorry, too, I couldn't bring you that mouse, but they wouldn't have let me if I'd asked, and I didn't ask because it would probably have given you indigestion."

He was still so excited that he couldn't sleep that night. When it got early enough he hurried out for the morning papers to see if there had been any new discoveries or developments.

There hadn't been. There was less in the papers than he knew already. But it was a big story and the papers played it big.

He spent most of three days at the New York U. lab, helping with further tests and examinations until there just weren't any new ones to try and darn little left to try them on. Then the government took over what was left and Bill Wheeler was on the outside again.

For three more days he stayed home, tuned in on all news reports on the radio and video and subscribed to every newspaper published in English in New York City. But the story gradually died down. Nothing further happened; no further discoveries were made and if any new ideas developed, they weren't given out for public consumption.

It was on the sixth day that an even bigger story broke—the assassination of the President of the United States. People forgot the spaceship.

Two days later the prime minister of Great Britain was killed by a Spaniard and the day after that a minor employe of the Politburo in Moscow ran amoke and shot a very important official.

A lot of windows broke in New York City the next day when a goodly portion of a county in Pennsylvania went up fast and came down slowly. No one within several hundred miles needed to be told that there was—or had been—a dump of A-bombs there. It was in sparsely populated country and not many people were killed, only a few thousand.

That was the afternoon, too, that the president of the stock exchange cut his throat and the crash started. Nobody paid too much attention to the riot at Lake Success the next day because of the unidentified submarine fleet that suddenly sank practically all the shipping in New Orleans harbor.

It was the evening of that day that Bill Wheeler was pacing up and down the front room of his apartment. Occasionally he stopped at the window to pet the Siamese named Beautiful and to look out across Central Park, bright under lights and cordoned off by armed sentries, where they were pouring concrete for the anti-aircraft gun emplacements.

He looked haggard.

He said, "Beautiful, we saw the start of it, right from this window. Maybe I'm crazy, but I still think that spaceship started it. God knows how. Maybe I should have fed you that mouse. Things couldn't have gone to pot so *suddenly* without help from somebody or something."

He shook his head slowly. "Let's dope it out, Beautiful. Let's say something came in on that ship besides a dead mouse. What could it have been? What could it have done and be doing?

"Let's say that the mouse was a laboratory animal, a guinea pig. It was sent in the ship and it survived the journey but died when it got here. Why? I've got a screwy hunch, Beautiful."

HE sat down in a chair and leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. He said, "Suppose the superior intelligence—from Somewhere—that made that ship came in with it. Suppose it wasn't the mouse—let's call it a mouse. Then, since the mouse was the only physical thing in the spaceship, the being, the invader, wasn't physical. It was an entity that could live apart from whatever body it had back where it came from. But let's say it could live in *any* body and it left its own in a safe place back home and rode

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here in one that was expendable, that it could abandon on arrival. That would explain the mouse and the fact that it died at the time the ship landed.

"Then the *being*, at that instant, just jumped into the body of someone here—probably one of the first people to run toward the ship when it landed. It's living in somebody's body—in a hotel on Broadway or a flophouse on the Bowery or anywhere—pretending to be a human being. That make sense, Beautiful?"

He got up and started to pace again.

"And having the ability to control other minds, it sets about to make the world—the Earth—safe for Martians or Venusians or whatever they are. It sees—after a few days of study—that the world is on the brink of destroying itself and needs only a push. So it could give that push.

"It could get inside a nut and make him assassinate the President, and get caught at it. It could make a Russian shoot his Number 1. It could make a Spaniard shoot the prime minister of England. It could start a bloody riot in the U. N., and make an army man, there to guard it, explode an A-bomb dump. It could—hell, Beautiful, it could push this world into a final war within a week. It practically *has* done it."

He walked over to the window and stroked the cat's sleek fur while he frowned down at the gun emplacements going up under the bright floodlights.

"And he's done it and even if my guess is right I couldn't stop him because I couldn't find him. And nobody would believe me, now. He'll make the world safe for Martians. When the war is over, a lot of little ships like that—or big ones—can land here and take over what's left ten times as easy as they could now."

He lighted a cigarette with hands that shook a little. He said, "The more I think of it, the more—"

He sat down in the chair again. He said, "Beautiful, I've got to *try*. Screwy as that idea is, I've got to give it to the authorities, whether they believe it or not. That Major I met was an intelligent guy. So is General Keely. I—"

He started to walk to the phone and then sat down again. "I'll call both of them, but let's work it out just a little finer first. See if I can make any intelligent suggestions how they could go about finding the—the *being*—"

He groaned. "Beautiful, it's impossible. It wouldn't even have to be a human being. It could be an animal, anything. It could be you. He'd probably take over whatever nearby type of mind was nearest his own. If he was remotely feline, you'd have been the nearest cat."

HE SAT up and stared at her. He said, "I'm going crazy, Beautiful. I'm remembering how you jumped and twisted just after that spaceship blew up its mechanism and went inert. And, listen, Beautiful, you've been sleeping twice as much as usual lately. Has your mind been out—

"Say, *that* would be why I couldn't wake you up yesterday to feed you. Beautiful, cats always wake up easily. *Cats* do."

Looking dazed, Bill Wheeler got up out of the chair. He said, "Cat, *am* I crazy, or—"

The Siamese cat looked at him languidly through sleepy eyes. Distinctly it said, *"Forget it."*

And halfway between sitting and rising, Bill Wheeler looked even more dazed for a second. He shook his head as though to clear it.

He said, "What was I talking about, Beautiful? I'm getting punchy from not enough sleep."

He walked over to the window and stared out, gloomily, rubbing the cat's fur until it purred.

He said, "Hungry, Beautiful? Want some liver?"

The cat jumped down from the windowsill and rubbed itself against his leg affectionately.

It said, "Miaouw."

●

AMONG NEXT ISSUE'S NOVELETS!

PROJECT SPACESHIP

by

A. E. VAN VOGT

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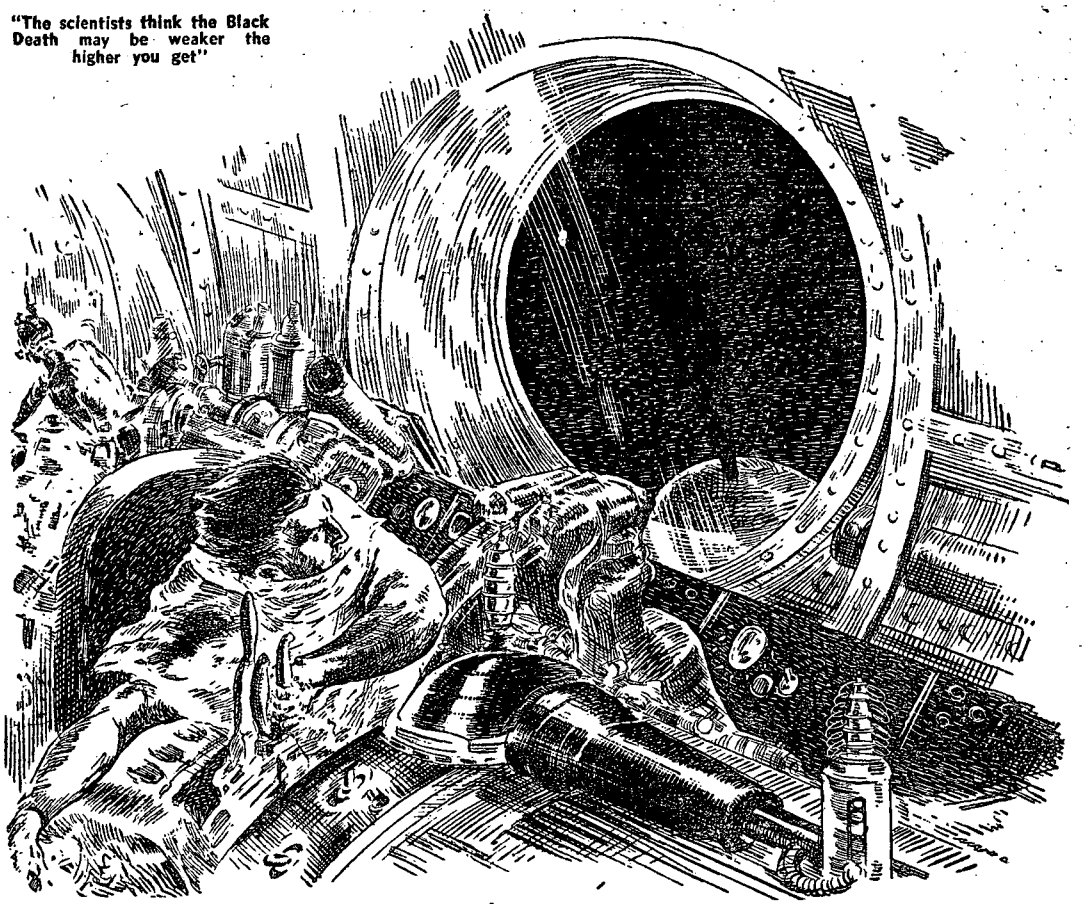
"The scientists think the Black Death may be weaker the higher you get"



Like a Keepsake

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

"All I can say is, if this should be the world's end, it's a real black color. . . ."

NEW MEXPORT

10 Sept. 1998

DEAR ZILL:

I guess you thought that all those things I told you the night before we blasted off for Earth were the same old talky handed to you Venusian women by every space-scarred, horney-handed guy on Interplanet.

I guess you'll be surprised to get this letter from me, too. Remember how I told you I thought your name was funny? Well, on the long trip back here to Earth I guess I said it to myself so many times, that it doesn't sound funny any more. So please forgive me. It's a wonderful name!

Another thing I ought to tell you about, Zill. Remember how I made out that I had been around the route a few times. That was a lie. I know, I told you that I was an old hand. And I even told you that maybe next trip I'd be in a co-pilot's slot. That was so much bunk, Zill. I just got out of space school two weeks before that last trip,

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and it was my first one. Maybe you guessed, but you were too much a lady to let on. As far as my job goes, I'm on damage-control and spend most all my time in a big mask looking at a welding torch flame. Some job, hey?

Well, the fellows told me what you Venusian women are like, and they told me that except for being pretty white on account of no sunshine, you all look the kind of women that here on earth we make actresses of. And then they told me some other stuff.

Honest, Zill, you're the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen, and you were certainly right to smack me the way you did. I believed that stuff the fellows told me. I should have known what kind of a girl you are. I hope you're not still mad. I'm not really that sort of a guy. Something about the soft night air there did things to me. Someday I'll bring you here so I can show you what a moon and stars look like. After you walked off in a huff I wandered around for hours before I went back and hit the sack.

Here I am in the big barracks near New Mexport, and I can tell you that after all that purple-and-green brush there on Venus it would look like a pretty rough place to a girl like you. The sun glares down and it would burn you to one big blister in five minutes. All rock and sand and hot wind.

I hope I'll be coming back soon, because we certainly got an awful lot to talk about, Zill, and I won't make a fool of myself like I did near the end of our evening last time I saw you.

I'm due to go back out again in three months, so that means it will be nearly a year before I see you again. The next time, I think I'll get sick at Venusport and get myself grounded for about a month.

The papers are all full of some sort of trouble in London. Tonight on the telescreen they gave us a quick look at it. I couldn't make head or tail of it—a black line that goes right up from a rooftop straight up into the air. The big scientists have given out with a lot of fancy language but nobody seems to know anything about it except that it's growing.

They make me go to classes all the time and learn more stuff about space, and so I will have to stop this now as I have a class coming up. I'll write again soon.

Best regards,
Bill Wheeland

BRISTOLPORT
20 Sept. 1998

DEAREST ZILL:

I guess you maybe are wondering what the dickens I am doing over here in England instead of staying at New Mexport and studying a lot of math and physics and stuff.

Well, it's like this. In the last letter I sent you, which you won't get yet for another three months probably, I told about this trouble in London.

Right now, it is two miles thick. I saw it three days ago. Looking at it is sort of like standing in the sunlight and looking into a place where it is black night. Velvety like. It is like looking at a wheel which is spinning so fast you can't see it move. And is it ever dark!

They found out about it when it was about the size of a pencil. The way they found out, some guy walked through it and it cut him right in half. It stops at the Heaviside Layer. When it was little—about as big around as your pretty arm—the scientists messed with it a lot, shoving steel bars into it and so on. Every time, the black stuff eats off the steel in a flash without even joggling the arm of the guy that holds it.

They don't know what it is yet. The newspapers are full of fancy talk. One old bug calls it a "crack in infinity." Imagine that? Others think it's extradimensional, or a vortex of pure force, or some such crackpot thing. All they really know is that it's black and it's really growing fast.

It doesn't suck stuff up, though. The way it baffles them the most is that when you take a tub of water and shove it up close to the thing, it eats a hole in the side of the tub but the water doesn't run out the hole. Beats me.

Lots of crazy people have sneaked by the police lines and jumped into it. They don't even yelp, I hear. Crazy religions have popped up all over and people are yammering about the end of the world. All I can say is, if this is the end of the world, it's a real black color, you bet!

Yesterday we watched the big artillery firing into it. Even though it's only two miles thick, the shells don't come out the other side. There isn't any explosion, even. Except, of course, when the shells go bam before they hit it.

They've tried flame-throwers and big jolts of electricity and fire hoses and everything,

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and nothing makes a dent on it. It just keeps expanding a little faster each day. Geometric rate of expansion, they say.

People are awful excited, Zill. Lots of them are getting drunk, and people in the parts of London that aren't touched yet are killing each other and raising the dickens in general.

The political boys are saying that this is the end of Great Britain at last, and there will have to be some new balance of power. You people on Venus know all about that, with both British and Russky bases not too darn far from where you live.

Right now, Parliament is arguing about using an atomic bomb to break this black thing up. Some of them say too much property is going to be destroyed and if they pay no attention to it, it will go away all by itself.

Hundreds of years ago they had something in London called the Black Death. You probably read about it in missionary school. Anyway, they're calling this black pillar the Black Death. It fits somehow, and I guess it will catch on.

On the telescreen this morning some U. S. politician from the Midwest made a short speech. He said that it was all a fake and that the British were making it up for some ulterior motive. If that thing is a fake, so is that congressman. And the British are beginning to think the Russkies put it in their back yard.

Anyway, it looks like in a few days they'll bomb it and then it'll be all over. I'll let you know.

Zill, I've been thinking over all the things I want to say to you, and I bet anything that when I see you again I won't be able to say a darn word. Already I feel shy and funny about seeing you again. I'm glad that two years ago they finally approved Venus-Earth marriages, if you know what I mean!

Affectionately,
Bill

PARISPORT
29 Sept. 1998

ZILL, DARLING:

London is gone. I know that isn't as much a shock to you as it is to me, because you've never seen it. Well, it looks like you never will.

The Black Death is ten miles in diameter now. It started a block from the East India Dock Road near where the River Thames makes that big loop you may have seen on maps. The west edge of it has gobbled up Kensington Gardens, the south end is down to Crystal Palace and on the north there isn't any such place as Walthamstow any more. The east part of it is out in the Plumstead Marshes.

Over here, we can see it during the daytime like a thin black shaft that goes right up into the blue sky, so far that you can't see the top of it. It is perfectly cylindrical. And I told you how black it is.

All the other countries have become pretty uneasy about the whole thing, but not to the extent of sending their big science bugs to help get rid of the thing. The newspapers and the telescreens are still loaded with wild guesses.

You've got no idea of the confusion. You see, the thing expands so slow that you can walk right away from it. The only trouble is that all the kinds of transportation away from London are completely messed up. The roads are jammed with people carrying bundles away from London and looking back over their shoulders at the Black Death with their eyes bugging out.

The thing that seems to have people the most upset is the way the bombs worked. They used rockets, and with the controls they've got they can hit the date on a dime at a thousand miles, as you know. The rockets were launched from secret bases in the north of Scotland. The first one was aimed to go off at the heart of the Black Death. It roared across the sky and dipped down into the blackness.

Nothing happened. They figured maybe it was a defective one. All the people had been evacuated for a long distance around the base of the thing. The second one that dropped into it didn't do a thing, either. They busted the third one very nicely about a hundred feet from the edge of the Black Death and about ten feet from the ground to reduce the effective range.

The big column of smoke and debris roared up to fifty thousand feet and you couldn't see the Black Death any more. But an hour later you could see it all right. It was just as healthy as ever. Or as unhealthy. They tried two more, and then gave up.

The United States is rushing all sorts of ships, air and water, over to England to evacuate the population if necessary. Already a few hundred thousand people have been transported to Canada, and they say the confusion there is something for the books. With

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winter coming on, that isn't such a hot place to take them to.

Tomorrow they're having a big deal. I finally found out why all of us were brought over here. They're taking the old ship, St. Louis, and selecting a skeleton crew by lot and taking her up to one hundred thousand miles, then jetting around and coming down with full steam ahead, with the idea of curving in under the Heaviside Layer and knocking the top off the Black Death.

Maybe I'll be picked as part of the crew. The thought of it gives me the cold shivers, but I wouldn't tell that to anybody but you, Zill. The scientists think the Black Death may be weaker the higher you get.

Last night I dreamed about you, honey. I dreamed that you were on the ramp waiting for me when I came out through the side port of a big, new ship. I hope it's a true dream, believe me!

With love,
Bill

ROMEPORT
10 Oct. 1998

ZILL, DARLING:

This is in haste. Too busy to write, and besides, the Interplanet schedules are so fouled up I couldn't be sure of getting this off to you.

We are down here in Rome and everybody has a sick look on their face, believe me! The Black Death had a sudden spurt in the rate of growth and the northern part of the British Isles is the only thing left. It has come down and bitten a big semicircular chunk out of France.

I've heard descriptions of how it was when the terrible thing hit the British seaports. There were untold millions of people who hadn't been able to get away yet. When the thing came marching down toward the water, the only thing they could do was sit and take it, or go on out into the water.

At Bristol, thousands of them crouched on the docks and sang old hymns and kept their eyes shut. As it marched across them the voices died out slowly, and then it went out across the water and after a while there weren't any more heads bobbing around.

There aren't any more governments on the continent of Europe. Just millions of crazy people going as fast as they can toward the Mediterranean coast hoping to get across to Africa, and other millions going towards the Russian border.

We heard a rumor that at first the Russians were shooting them down, but pure weight of numbers won out and there doesn't seem to be any Russian border any more. Already, we can see the thing on bright days. A black column in the sky in the northwest.

A senator from California was on the telescreen this morning. He said that no true Californian believed for one minute that this European invention, the Black Death, would ever march to California's sunny shores. He ended up with a weather report.

There are eighteen space ships here at Romeport and yesterday some of the guys took one over without authority and blasted off. Central Control send a rocket interceptor and we looked for the flash at night, but I guess they were too far out when it hit them.

I guess I didn't tell you that the St. Louis slammed into the Black Death and there wasn't even a ripple. It has sort of a fat and squatty look now, and they say that closer to it, it fills the horizon and you can't see the roundness of it—just a black curtain of velvet that moves slowly.

Time to move, now. We're taking all the ships to New Mexport.

This thing is getting out of control, honey, and I'm off my feed and not sleeping too good. I guess nobody is. I think about you a lot.

All my love,
Bill

NEW MEXPORT
22 Oct. 1998

ZILL, HONEY:

I took a look around this morning. It's the most terrific thing I've ever seen! I had no idea there were so many space ships in operation. All sizes, all lined up across the desert here with their shining snouts pointed at the deep blue of the sky.

There are no governments left on the face of the earth. I suppose every emergency winds up in the lap of the one guy who seems to have some answers. I never heard of this John Crown before. Anyway, he's in charge. He had some sort of a job in Washington, I guess, before the government folded.

We have perimeter defenses around New Mexport, manned by a big chunk of the army. He has a special batch of fast aircraft and they have been going to all parts of the world that are still untouched and bringing back people. They are all quar-

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tered within our perimeter defenses. Right now, the only thing space ships mean to the average guy is a chance to get off this planet.

Last night I heard the heavy *chug, chug, chug* of rockets slamming out across the desert at the bands of rough citizens who would like to get in here and take over one of the ships. The people Crown is bringing in here are of all nationalities, and I guess that you could say they are the cream of humanity. He's also having books and things brought in. That irritates a lot of the guys, who think that maybe this Crown will be rescuing books instead of people.

New York is gone, baby. Funny, but the shock of New York going isn't as bad as London. I guess all of us are getting a little punchy.

It's tough on the little kids. They walk around here with smeary little faces and puffy eyes getting in everybody's way, and there's no way to tell them what the trouble is. I'm exhausted, honey. They've had me doing repair work on old ships that had been retired and hadn't yet been busted up for scrap.

So it looks like I'll be seeing you before too long. I'm getting this off in a ship that's headed out in an hour, so I must close now. I've got to get the letter smuggled aboard. There's no room for mail anymore.

Right now, the Black Death has covered Montreal and New York, Cairo and Moscow. That'll give you an idea of the size of it. The weather is clear and dry. I guess so many clouds and storms have blown into the darn thing that there won't be any more rain here.

All my love,
Bill

New Mexport

DEAR ZILL:

Where all the ships were there is nothing but sand. There are a few left. This morning we could see the Blackness in the east. There hasn't been any sunrise yet. The sun is behind the thing.

I'll give this to one of the guys in the barracks to take with him. He'll give it to you personally.

I don't know how to say all this, Zill. I don't know how to say any part of it. The board that Crown set up has cleared the last of the crews for the remaining ships. I'm not on any of the crews. And I'm not a passenger.

I keep thinking that if I had maybe a year more experience in space I'd be worth taking along. As it stands, I'm just a punk who doesn't know much about space and doesn't know anything about anything else.

All the time, I thought I'd be going. Pretty silly, wasn't it? When I realized what was going to happen I got sort of a stiff grin on my face, and I went in and sat on my bunk and bit on my thumb knuckle to keep from crying like a baby.

Misery loves company, I suppose, but I don't get much comfort out of thinking of all the millions and millions of people who have disappeared into that Black Death.

Crown thinks he's staying behind, too. There's a plan to slug him and put him aboard the last ship. He'll wake up in deep space. I guess that's a good thing. He's turned this escape into a pretty orderly thing.

Well, Zill, there isn't much point in weeping on your pretty shoulder, and I've given up thinking that maybe they'll change their mind about me. I even thought of killing one of the crew guys so that maybe I could take his place, but there are hundreds of guys in my shoes and the odds are against my being picked, even if I could do such a thing.

I keep thinking that things would have worked out very nicely for the two of us, but I guess it is just one of those things. You are very beautiful, Zill, and you will find a nice guy, I am sure. Better find a smarter guy than me, Zill.

Joey is around looking for this letter, so I must close now. I like to think that maybe you will keep these letters of mine. Sort of like a keepsake.

I know this writing is a little wobbly, but you ought to be able to read it okay. To tell the truth, I'm scared green!

Anyway, when you find a nice guy, which I am sure you will, you better hide these letters of mine so he won't read them and get jealous. If he isn't good to you, honey, I will transport myself over there and I'll haunt the son of a gun. Ha, ha!

Your friend,
Bill Wheeland

●

Next Issue: Four Outstanding Science Fiction Novelets by MURRAY LEINSTER, ARTHUR C. CLARKE, A. E. VAN VOGT and JOHN D. MacDONALD!

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a novelet

CHAPTER I

Inspiration

JOSE PINDOBAL, the Plantations' sole remaining physicist, wakened as if someone had slapped his face. He had done it again. He had fallen asleep over his work. The lights were still on in the laboratory. His clock said it was three o'clock in the morning. It was a little odd that Maria had not telephoned him.

If he could sneak home and into his hammock without waking her he would escape the lecture that was now a certainty. It wasn't the first time by many that he had fallen asleep in the laboratory and wakened in the small hours of the morning or when

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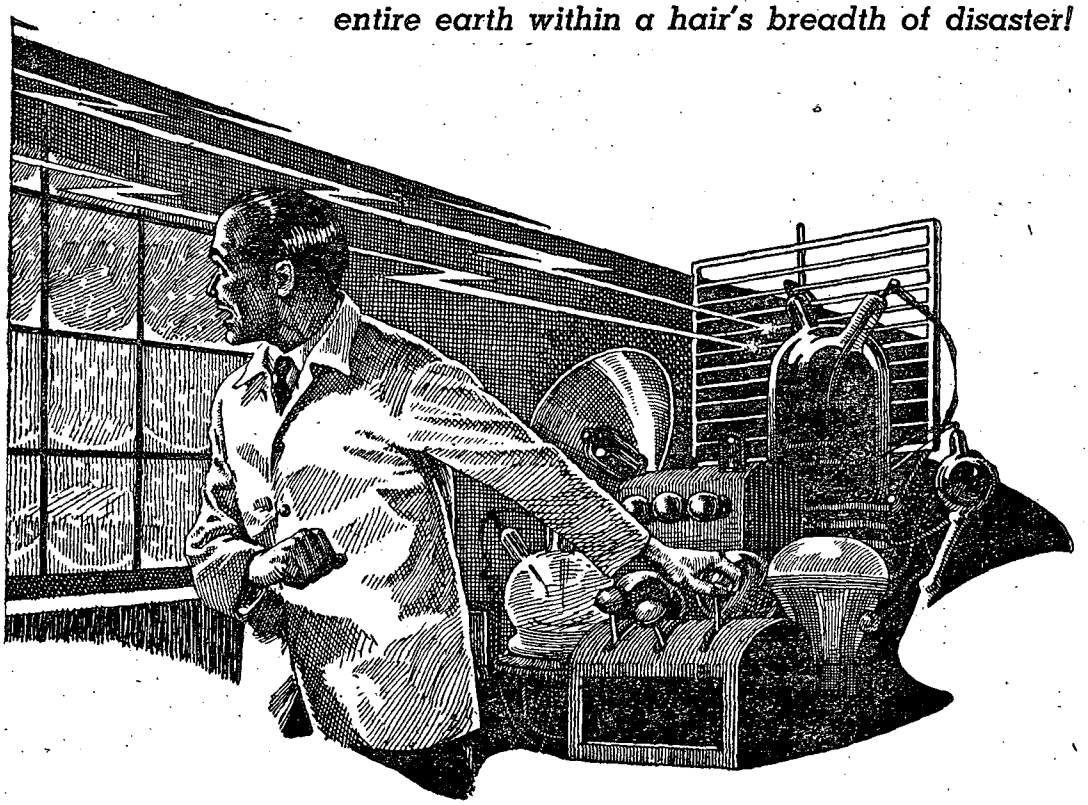
by ARTHUR J. BURKS

WHITE CATASTROPHE

Jose Pindobal's wife could think of but one way for him to win fame—and his success brought the entire earth within a hair's breadth of disaster!



the siren keened getting-up time at five-thirty.

He had never been so cold in his life, even when he had had malarial chills and fever. The laboratory was like ice. He glanced at the window which gave on Belterra's principal street, *Estrada* One, and noted on its outside a strange unbelievable film, or coating, of something he had read about but never seen save in pictures—*frost!*

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His hair almost stood on end. This thing was utterly ridiculous. The laboratory was in the heart of the administrative area of Belterra, the Ford Plantations, and Belterra was as near the heart of the Brazilian tropics as it could get without actually sitting on the equator.

"Winter" in Belterra was simply a time of excessive rain with little cessation of summer's heat and more mosquitoes than usual. The average temperature ran around a hundred degrees at ten o'clock on almost any morning, increasing to about one hundred and three or four at noon.

Outside of the refrigerator—which produced a frost that Pindobal knew and ice—and the results of some of his own chemical activities in the laboratory, there probably had not been naturally produced frost in Belterra during the million years immediately preceding the naming of the place. Yet, there it was—and Jose Pindobal was cold for a reason other than the frost on the outside of the windowpane and the chill in the small laboratory.

He found himself afraid to go to the door and look out, but if what he feared had happened—an utter impossibility—he must face it sooner or later. He opened the door on the deserted yard of the motor pool. Lighted by a pale moon the shadows of the garage, the office buildings, the stores and storeroom, stood out, more sharply etched than ever in his experience even when the moon was at the brilliant full which the tropics allowed.

The silence was broken only by the rising murmur of his heartbeats.

Stretching away across the yard, but beyond the locked iron gate, out into the first section of young rubber trees, as far as the eyes could see, snow covered the ground to a depth of at least six inches.

"Mother of God!" moaned Jose Pindobal. "Tell me it isn't so! Tell me I am not responsible for this hideous thing!"

He stopped and gathered a handful of the soft powdery stuff. Snow was also outside his experience because he had spent all his life in the Amazon Valley. His hand shook until the flakes sifted off the palm and through his fingers. His whole body began to shake.

He turned back into the laboratory, shut the door behind him, leaned against it. His face was the face of a hunted animal. His eyes protruded as, one by one he studied the instruments on tables, walls, floor—the balances, the scales, the chemicals, the retorts, the Bunsen burners, the vials, tumblers, pipets. The thing simply could not be true!

TWO weeks ago Jose Pindobal, who had been in the laboratory since its erection, fourteen years before—his estate so lowly that he became its head only after every other American and Brazilian physicist had left—had had a waking dream. There was plenty of time for dreaming for there was little Plantation work to do.

The place was falling apart, laborers and white collar men leaving so fast that even ordinary routine could not be carried out. The job of the laboratory was rubber, the analyzing of diseases of rubber trees, of blights, of jungle plants which occasionally killed livestock, of experimental shrubs the Brazilian head of the Plantations wished to try out.

Jose Pindobal's wage was sixty dollars a month, which indicated, as he fully realized, the importance of the laboratory to the decaying Plantations. The General Manager looked in about once a week, merely to see if he were present. He doubted if the boss even knew his name. Yes, there was plenty of time—and Jose Pindobal was ambitious. Buried in the most obscure laboratory in South America there wasn't the slightest chance that he would ever make his mark in the world. He often confided his ambitions to Maria, his wife.

"I can think of but one way for you to become famous, my Jose," she said.

"And that, Maria?" he countered, not very hopefully.

"By causing snow to fall on Belterra and producing ice on the Tapajos River!" Maria had gone to school two years in the United States and never missed a chance to tell everybody, even Jose, about the winters with snow and ice, the snowball fights and ice skating, which she had so much enjoyed.

It was utterly foolish, of course, but here, two weeks later, at three o'clock in the morning, there was snow on the face of Belterra, clinging to the prayerful arms of the young rubber trees. And for all of those two weeks Jose Pindobal had been thinking of Maria's words.

That sort of thing would make the world sit up and take notice, so much was clear, and he spent hours just dreaming about it and trying to figure out some scientific meth-

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od by which the thing could be done. Not only that but he had actually tried a few experiments!

He thought back now to some of his first ideas, based on what he had read while a student in São Paulo. Into his mind had flashed an imaginary picture of the ice age, when the creeping glaciers from the Far North had covered so much of the Northern Hemisphere. What had caused them? How had they been dispersed, been caused to recede, not by human agency but by Nature?

Could Nature's work with the glaciers be done by man on a smaller scale? Was it true that what man could imagine man could do? Jose Pindobal could imagine the Tapajos River, sixth in size of the Amazon's tributaries, fifteen kilometers wide at Belterra, frozen from bank to bank. It scarcely flowed at Belterra, thirty kilometers from the Amazon. It was really a series of long lakes for its last two hundred kilometers. Yes, he could imagine that.

Then he thought of some of the world's high mountains, of one in particular—Shasta, in the Western United States, on whose crest was perpetual snow, visible to Californians in the middle of the hottest summer. If now, there were a mountain near Belterra high enough to reach the altitude of the snows—but there wasn't. Belterra itself was around five hundred feet above sea level.

He would have to do this thing Maria had suggested without the aid of a mountain, the nearest one being in the Andes, quite too far to the west. However, if a man were able to produce all the *symptoms* of a mountain . . .

So his thoughts ran, the wildest he had ever had. He did not discuss his thoughts or his experiments with Maria, who had probably forgotten the snatch of conversation which had started him thinking.

Besides chemistry he had the aid of electric power—2300 volts—not much power, but electric power just the same, which he could manage to augment for his experiments. There wasn't much you could do with twenty-three hundred volts and that was what made experimentation especially interesting.

He had worked out a way to increase the electrical force, on his own. He had made use of all the wire he could beg, borrow or steal. A maze of the stuff was new in operation in the laboratory. He had been working with the wires when he had dropped off to sleep, probably around eleven o'clock, his bedtime ordinarily being eight-thirty or nine. In less than four hours snow had covered—

How much of Belterra *did* it cover, anyway?

He was shivering with the cold. There was nothing in the laboratory to keep him warm. The clothing he needed had never been seen in the tropics. Soon Belterra would waken and see—it began to snow again, a gentle snowfall, silent, deep, mysterious, which remains a wonder to people who see it every year of their lives. It made Jose Pindobal feel like praying.

Out on the street he looked right and left—left to the church and beyond, right to the post office, the village beyond that and, far beyond the village, the towering monsters of the jungles, the "old forest," which had been standing longer than the oldest inhabitant could remember.

The forest crowns were blocked out by snow! Trees which inherited the sunlight of generations without snow now held tons of it aloft in unaccustomed branches and leaves. Jose Pindobal had got over his first terror. After all, wasn't this what he had tried to do in theory all along? Roofs were covered with white so that dark walls looked wild and fearful below them. The church roof was a mantle of white.

NOW, how about the river? Jose Pindobal raced back to the motor pool, got out a Ford pick-up truck, drove to his own home near the post office.

"Maria! Maria!" he called, forgetting all about the lecture.

"What in time do you mean, coming home at this hour?" Then Maria, her head out the door of the palm frond cabin, noted the snow.

"Jose!" she cried. "The *snow!* You've *done* it, Jose! But what are you doing with the company car? You know it is only for visiting officials, who get everything free! You'll be fired!"

"It comes to me that I will not be fired," he said, with such dignity as he could muster in view of the fact that his teeth were chattering and the heat of the motor helped very little. "Bring the children, wrapped warmly. You come, too! Bring me something to wrap about myself. I have never been so cold. My hammock will do."

It was a strange group, the Pindobal fam-

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ily, seven in number, jammed into the car with every bit of clothing, sheets and blankets they possessed wrapped around them.

"But what *is* the white stuff?" asked the children.

"Have I never told you of snow in the United States?" said Maria.

"All our lives, *mamae,*" said the oldest son. "And this is it?"

Jose Pindobal had only driven when he had no business behind the wheel, as now, and he was far from being a good driver. So when he reached the top of the grade which led down to the river level at Porto Novo it was not strange that the car skidded a little and went down the hill sidewise, crashing into nothing important because there were no other cars out that early in the morning and the banks were high enough to keep him approximately on the road.

There was snow everywhere.

"Jose!" said Maria, awe and worship in her voice, something Jose had resigned himself never to hear. "Jose, you are a genius, a great man. Tell your Maria and your children how you did it?"

"I," said Jose Pindobal, "am a scientist, as you know. I made intricate calculations on the basis of which I arrived at certain conclusions, upon which I based chemical and physical experiments that worked out. I decided that what Nature could do, anywhere in the world with no equipment at all, I could do here in Belterra with such equipment as our laboratory affords. It appears that I succeeded."

"Somewhere," murmured Maria, "I seem to remember saying something about how you could become famous by causing snow to fall in Belterra and the Tapajos river to freeze over. Is it perhaps that I gave you the idea, after all?"

"If you did, my Maria," said Jose, "perhaps you will explain to the children just how you arranged for me to put your idea into effect?"

"I meant to detract nothing from your triumph," said Maria. "I will not even complain that you did not come home on time."

Jose Pindobal managed to turn left into the side road to Porto Novo. The snow held all the way. To the left the old forest, interspersed with wild rubber trees of great majesty, wore cloaks of white. The cow pasture to the right was a white blanket, in the midst of which scores of beef cattle stood close together for warmth—or perhaps in terror of what had happened to them.

The Pindobal family reached the mighty Tapajos river at Porto Novo.

"Holy Mother!" said Maria.

"The old man did it!" said the oldest son, forgetting for just a few moments the respect due a father who was also a scientific genius. The children had heard and remembered Maria's suggestion that there was only one way for Jose Pindobal to become famous at Belterra.

There were half a dozen small schooners at anchor in the roadstead. They were not anchored in the usual meaning of the word. They were frozen in. Here Jose Pindobal had his first glimpse of the terror he could produce and, by inference, what power he wielded because of what he had done.

The hundred or so people who lived in Porto Novo were assembled on the high bank of the Tapajos as if for the last day of the world or the Day of Judgment. It was the first time in his life he had ever seen more than two Brazilians together that were not arguing and waving their arms.

Women and children knelt, shivering, to pray. Men stood in the snow, white of face, shifting back and forth from one bare foot to the other, staring out upon the river, obviously frozen solid as far out from the shore as they could see.

"They'll all freeze," said Maria. "They'll get pneumonia and die."

"Then you explain snow to them," said Jose helplessly. "Right now I can't think of any way!"

Maria called out to her country people but not one head was turned to look at her.

MARIA had an inspiration. She called to her children to pile out of the car and engaged them in a snow fight, the details of which she had explained to them since they had been babies. Their laughter and shouting communicated to the fearful men and women of Porto Novo as nothing else could have done. The kneeling children first caught the contagion and there was a general all-around face-washing to the tune of squealing and laughter. And so Maria held the attention of her people.

"It is all part of my Jose's scientific experiments at Belterra," she explained. "It is nothing to be afraid of. When it has served its purpose it will be turned off."

"Just when, Jose Pindobal," asked Mari-

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ano Tapuyo, Porto Novo's oldest resident, "are you going to turn off this white catastrophe?"

Jose Pindobal sought desperately fast for an answer, found one at the end of his tongue. "I am under orders, remember? I can do nothing until commanded so to do by the General Manager of the Plantation!"

They piled the children back into the car. Maria looked out across the frozen Tapajos to where the low far opposite bank was usually visible as a wall perhaps two yards high, across the horizon from south to north.

"Jose!" she said. "Look yonder! It can't be true, I know. It has to be an optical illusion, but it certainly looks real enough . . ."

"Yep, Dad!" said Jose Junior. "I see what mama's afraid to say! There's a *mountain* on the other bank, or just behind it. Looks just like pictures I saw in school of Japan's Fujiyama!"

Jose Pindobal stared in his turn, not sure now that his heart was beating at all. Of course he had *thought* of a mountain high enough that its crest would catch the snows of the heights, but among all impossible things— And yet, had a Great Master not said, *"If your faith be as a grain of mustard seed ye may command the mountain to cast itself into the sea and it will obey you!"*

"My faith is very slight!" wailed Jose Pindobal. "And I gave no command—*except in my sleep! I did* think." Then he heaved a sigh of relief. He didn't really mind a mountain appearing where there could not possibly be one but he wanted to *expect* it to be able to get used to the idea a little at a time. He had noticed no mountain after all—but only clouds, high and white and heavy, *which behaved exactly as if they hovered about a mountain peak!*

He remembered then his idea of developing all the *symptoms* of a mountain and groaned, but managed to regain some of his confidence on the drive back to Belterra, where people were now pouring from their houses to form silent shivering groups, to stare at the ground, the lowering white clouds from which came not the rain, to which they were all accustomed, but *snow,* entirely outside their experience.

Nobody said anything to Jose Pindobal. No official even demanded why he drove a company car without authority. He left his wife and family at home, returned to his laboratory, his mind almost deserting him as it labored over all the combinations and possibilities. He expressed himself succinctly when, an hour later, Charles Townsend, the *Gerente,* entered the laboratory.

"You're the only scientist on the plantation, Pindobal. Maybe you've some explanation for this unheard of phenomenon and what we can do about it?"

Jose Pindobal gulped and swallowed. "I can explain it, *Senhor* Charles! That is, up to a point I can. *I caused it!* Rather I set forces in motion somehow which produced the phenomenon."

"What rot!" said the *Gerente.* "What man could cause this?"

"There is snow," said Jose with dignity. "It has been somehow caused. Do you know how?"

"Well, no. I'll accept your crazy statement on one condition—that you turn it off before it kills all our rubber trees and drives people crazy in the Valley!"

Two huge tears slipped from Jose's eyes and scurried down his swart cheeks.

"I would give my hands and my brain, *Senhor* Charles," he wailed, "if I could do that! But I don't know how! I made a dozen different experiments with forces last night and early this morning but which one of them did what you Americans call 'ring the bell' I do not know! I do not know how it started, scientifically, therefore I have no idea how to stop it!"

"And possibly," said the *Gerente,* "you had nothing to do with it at all?"

But Jose Pindobal had waited too long for fame. "I did it all right!" he said.

CHAPTER II

The Winter Crept

AT NINE o'clock that morning nobody in the world save the people of Belterra knew that snow had fallen in the heart of the tropics. But at nine-fifteen o'clock the company radio to Belem made contact and gave the brief word to the world:

"Snow falls at Belterra, heart of the Central Brazilian tropics. Tapajos frozen over at same spot, thirty kilometers from the Amazon. Obscure Brazilian scientist named Jose Pindobal claims he produced the miracle of snow and ice!"

The Belem office made the Belterra office

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repeat the message twice, each time confirmed by Townsend, before it would accept the statement as sufficiently true to give to the press. Then the air waves began to pulsate with the phenomenon.

At nine-fifteen also the tri-weekly mail and passenger plane came out of the east from Belem, unwarned, to scare the pilot, copilot, steward and passengers half out of their wits. For suddenly, where they had been accustomed to seeing Belterra, there now seemed to be a blank space. Townsend had to wave half a dozen times to the pilot before he could be convinced it was safe to land. His face a mask, Jose Pindobal stood beside Townsend, who addressed the pilot brusquely.

"You've got Manfred Kramer aboard, haven't you? The American physicist? I saw in the newspapers—"

"Yes, I'm aboard, or was," said a hearty voice beside Townsend. "Just what is going on here anyway?"

"I would like to know that myself, Mr. Kramer. Maybe you can tell me. But first, I'd like to go up and circle about, see just what the extent of this thing is."

"We hit it about a minute before Belterra came in sight," said the pilot. "There was the usual jungle and water all the way from Belem. Then, suddenly, there was neither jungle nor water, just this stuff. Flying into it was like flying into an icebox."

"That's mostly imagination," said Townsend. "It has to be reasonably warm to snow—which will doubtless sound very strange to any Brazilian."

Kramer, Townsend, pilot and copilot headed for the plane. The passengers insisted that since they had paid their passage they also had a right to any side trips. So it was a loaded plane that took off on the oddest observation trip ever taken above the Amazon Valley.

There were many "firsts" for Jose Pindobal. This was his first airplane ride, something he could refer to casually the next time Maria began talking of her two years in the United States. She probably wouldn't talk so much about the snow she had experienced after this!

The plane shot up to five hundred feet while Jose Pindobal kept his mouth shut to hold his heart in. Then he gave himself to the glory of flight. Looking out and down he could see just where the snow lay—and his heart began hammering with another kind of excitement.

Before one of his experiments he had allowed his imagination complete free play. If, he had told himself, he could cause snow to fall on Belterra and ice to form on the Tapajos, he could confine both to certain definite areas! Therefore, either as a matter of bravado or as an expression of faith, he had made a penciled outline of just where the snow and ice were to extend.

Belterra's plateau was to be covered, the seventeen thousand acres of cultivated rubber and one-half mile of the surrounding jungles. The road to Porto Novo and ten kilometers further north to Pindobal—the harbor which was *not* named for Jose or any of his family—was to be covered, overflowing it to the left to half the distance between the road and the river, to extend a half mile into the forest to the right as one traveled north!

Below him now, if he ever needed proof again, was proof enough that Jose Pindobal's experiment, one of them, or a combination of them, had worked or got out of hand—for the snow lay almost exactly on the area of land which he had sketched out rudely when he had planned his experiment!

"You must always have a plan!" Doctor Camargo of the Institute of Agronomy had preached to his underlings. "You never accomplish anything without a plan!"

Well, Jose Pindobal had had a plan and it appeared to be proving the words of Doctor Camargo, superintendent of the Ford Plantations as well as head of the Institute!

"Why didn't I think to tell *Senhor* Charles *before* we took off on this flight?" he asked himself. "Now when I tell him he'll simply believe I was inspired by what we all see from the plane!"

KRAMER and Townsend were sitting in one of the rear seats, deep in conversations. Once in a while one or the other looked at Jose Pindobal.

"It's ridiculous, of course," said Townsend, "but snow in the Amazon Valley is itself ridiculous."

"Anything can happen, even the impossible, when a half-baked scientist begins to mess with forces he doesn't understand. We can always check on this lad. He doesn't look very bright to me."

"But if it works out that he *did* cause this?" asked Townsend.

"Then, even if it was the purest accident,

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he looks bright enough to be world famous!" said Kramer.

It was the "mountain" on the far bank of the Tapajos that stirred Jose Pindobal the most. The river, as he had anticipated, was frozen completely across and the ice hung from a spot five kilometers upriver to an equal distance downriver from Belterra. The snow and ice had been isolated then!

The "mountain" was a strange mountain indeed. It appeared that only the clouds recognized it, for snow clouds, unmistakable in their whiteness, hung all about what might have been a mountain peak twelve to fifteen thousand feet high. Wind stirred and hurled them. Their fleecy tendrils whipped out like raveled fleeces far above the altitude being flown by the plane.

"There's a *mountain* there!" cried a woman. "But the map and book both fail to show any mountain."

"There is no mountain," said Townsend, fearful of a panic—for the plane was heading straight into where the mountain's side would be if there were a mountain.

"I once flew all around Mount Ranier in Washington!" said the woman. "I guess I know what a high mountain looks like in winter with clouds around its crest!"

"There is no mountain, lady," insisted Townsend, "high or low, visible or invisible."

"There is a mountain," said Jose, courage suddenly rising in him as he became absolutely sure for the first time that this was no dream and that he had done all this. "There is a mountain, all right," he repeated. "It's an invisible mountain, made up of lines of force, but it is there!"

"He knows, lady," said Townsend sarcastically, "because he made it!"

That, Jose Pindobal realized, was the surest way to make her disbelieve it. Townsend was a smart man. Kramer was looking oddly at Jose Pindobal, now beckoned him to the seat in front of Townsend and himself.

"These lines of force, Jose," he said quietly, "are of course the lines of vertical force first suggested years ago by Marconi."

"Nicola Tesla," said Jose Pindobal promptly. Kramer glanced at Townsend. "I've thought often of his theory of lines of force too high for enemy neighbors to surmount, erected at every national frontier. When I thought of a mountain that would attract and catch the snow I knew that one composed of lines of force might do it. Snow would also fall through the 'mountain' onto the ground, which was what I wished to happen."

"If the snow doesn't melt before nightfall," said Townsend grimly, "do you realize what it means to Plantations?"

"The death," said Jose Pindobal miserably, "of two million two hundred and fifty thousand rubber trees just coming into production!"

"Exactly! And a lot of other things you haven't even imagined! People inside your ring of snow are catching pneumonia, grippe, common cold." Townsend clamped his lips tightly. He had said enough.

"Then the thing to do is find the way to turn it off!" said Pindobal. "I've said I don't know which of my experiments, or combination of them, caused this. One thing only is familiar—the outline of the snow on the earth. It's just the way I laid it out, the very area I wished the snow to cover and so planned in one of my calculations. But I meant the crest of the mountain to be directly above Belterra and there are other things in this I didn't allow for!"

"No doubt," said Townsend. "You realize of course that you don't have a job?"

"Then I have no responsibility for unraveling my work, have I? If you will land and let me off I'll collect my family and we'll start moving!"

Kramer laughed softly. "If I'm going to be of any use to you, Charles," he said. "I'm going to need your chief scientist, who naturally wishes to be paid—at, I should say, something like double his current wage! Besides, by now the world will take a great interest in what happens to Jose Pindobal!"

JOSE looked at Townsend, who shrugged, grinned wryly and nodded.

"If I am to do anything in time," said Pindobal, "we'd best get back to the laboratory. One of the things I had not counted on is happening. You'll notice it has begun snowing again—but have you noticed that the area has been extended all around for more than a kilometer? And there is, or should be, no one in the laboratory!"

Townsend instructed the pilot to turn back. The plane had circled the snow area, had flown directly through Jose's "mountain," and everybody aboard was satisfied of the truth of what their senses had reported.

"I regret just one thing, Townsend," said

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Jose, enjoying the wince of the *Gerente* when so familiarly addressed by an underling whose name he had had to ask. "What is my snow doing to the birds, the beasts, the snakes, the insects?"

"Better worry about *people* dying!" snapped Townsend.

"They can be got out or instructed what to wear and about building fires," said Jose. "What you're really concerned about is rubber, isn't it? It's about eleven o'clock, ordinarily the heat of the day. We may need as much time to turn this off as it took me to turn it on, so if we're to get started—"

"There won't be anything to it," said Kramer pompously. "All we'll have to do is disconnect all electrical equipment in the laboratory, throw out or brake up all chemicals that appear to be 'working' and the snow, the mountain, the ice in the Tapajos, will simply all collapse. The snow will produce no more muddy water when it runs off than a good rain."

"I can agree about the melting snow," said Jose Pindobal, delighted with himself that he could disagree with a world-famous scientist and noting by Townsend's expression that the *Gerente* was going to make sure his disagreement reached the press the instant reporters began to descend on Belterra.

"I can't agree about my edifice of invisible forces collapsing. I wish it were true but it isn't—or the area of snow would not increase when nothing is being done in the laboratory. No, Kramer, it isn't just a matter of erasing the gadgets and forces by which I brought this into being but of starting from scratch and *tearing* it down!

"And if anybody has got into the laboratory and messed with my stuff—and the Brazilian doesn't live who wouldn't try if he got a chance—we may have a real job on our hands. I may have brought perpetual snow and ice to the Amazon Valley."

"Belterra," corrected Townsend, "and ten kilometers of the Lower Tapajos!"

"With a spread all around," reminded Jose Pindobal, "of approximately one kilometer! If the spread is arithmetically progressive how long before there is snow in Santarem and ice on the Amazon?"

The woman who knew a mountain when she saw it looked up from her books and maps and answered the question as if she had been a judge sentencing a delinquent.

"Thirty days!" she said.

The plane landed, slid through the snow to a stop. Snow fell silently, mysteriously. It fell on the upturned face of Jose Pindobal who, deep inside him, was beginning in a very strange way, to *grow!*

CHAPTER III

The World Descends

THE press services of the world checked and rechecked on the wild story which came unheralded out of the Amazon Valley. When satisfied that the story, in substance, was true, those services which had representatives in Rio bade them hurry to Belterra, quite ignoring the fact that it was considerably more than a hop, skip and jump, while those services which did not have representatives began sending them as fast as diplomatic wheels could be turned.

The little company radio connecting Belterra with Belem was jammed. Camargo and Townsend closed it to all but official business, then by weight of press, political and public opinion, were forced to reopen it, reserving only the right to establish company priorities.

One of the first messages which came over was a bid from a chemical company in the United States for the services of Jose Pindobal, offering more money than he had ever imagined receiving—two hundred dollars a month! Charles Townsend with difficulty restrained him from arranging for a chartered plane to Belem.

"I admit that two hundred dollars is four thousand *cruzeiros* but it still is not all the money in the world. Besides, I feel that you owe something to the company."

"For making me laboratory chief when I was the only chemist left? Just *what* do I owe the company?"

"The right to be free of whatever it is you have caused here."

"I shall stay, *Senhor*," said Jose Pindobal, "provided that my pay becomes four thousand *cruzeiros* per month, this stipend to hold until I am offered more by other foreign groups with vision!"

"Only Dr. Camargo can grant such a raise in pay."

"Contact him, then!"

"Oh, well, I'll guarantee it. If he refuses I'll make it good myself."

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"While we are talking," said Kramer, "nothing much is happening to the snow, ice and the mountain, except that the air is getting colder, a wind is rising and, if I am not mistaken, the snow field is much bigger than it was! Now, Jose, just what did you do here in all this maze of stuff?"

"My name, Kramer," said Jose Pindobal, "is *Senhor* Pindobal!"

"My apologies, *Senhor* Pindobal!" said Kramer with a deep bow. "Have you any written calculations?"

"Yes. I began by estimating at what Centigrade reading snow might reasonably be expected to fall, other conditions being equal. I have the figures here somewhere."

"I can estimate that, I think," said Kramer gravely. "What else?"

"I estimated the height a mountain should be to catch snow—twelve to fifteen thousand feet. At least I felt that that was enough with which to experiment. Then I laid out a design over the map of Belterra which should include all of Belterra and a kilometer extention all around.

"By a series of intricate calculations I decided just where a perpendicular to my plane-design, from the mathematical center of the design and therefore from the center of Belterra, extended to a height of twelve to fifteen thousand feet—"

"Just where *is* the center?" asked Townsend. "Surely not where your mountain stands, clear on the other side of the Tapajos, almost out of sight of Belterra entirely!"

"The design was correct," said Jose Pindobal stiffly, "even if a slight error in calculation caused the mountain—"

"Please let *Senhor* Pindobal continue," said Kramer, "before he gets another and bigger offer to make the same kinds of mistakes for bigger and better companies!"

A boy entered the laboratory with a radio. He said it was for Jose Pindobal before Townsend could flag him down or snatch the message. It offered Jose Pindobal three hundred dollars a month as a scientific consultant to a professor of pure science who held the chair in one of the biggest colleges in the United States.

"Okay, Pendobal," said Townsend, "three hundred a month, but let me remind you that if it develops that you didn't cause this after all you won't even be worth sixty a month to the Plantations!"

"That I do not fear," said Pindobal in a tone of voice which indicated that he did, after all, fear that very thing. So many things were happening which were outside his most careful calculations.

"Now the lines of force," persisted Kramer. "How did you erect them in the semblance of a mountain?"

"First I projected my plane-design into the air in an infinite series of points, lines connecting the tips of which would be the contours of the mountain in my mind."

"A geometrical operation requiring but the twist of a wrist!" said Kramer wryly. "More infinite wrist twists! One for each point!"

"It is no time for levity, Kramer!" said Jose Pindobal. "Perhaps I was a little careless with my points. But I erected them in various places—atop the laboratory, atop the church at Coracãs—the Heart of the Plantations—at Pindobal and Porto Novo."

"Just *when* did you do all this?" asked Townsend.

"During the past two weeks," said Pindoval miserably, "while I was out checking on the progress of leaf blight among the rubber trees!"

"The work," Townsend pointed out, "for which you are paid! Who drove the car for you? Who helped you erect the points? How did you energize them?"

"The thing to do is un-energize them, Charlie," said Kramer. "You can bawl this man out all the rest of his life after we've managed to disrupt this Ice Age he started. To begin with, since it is easy to replace if it doesn't work, let us remove the 'points' he established atop the laboratory."

"Somehow he must have strung wires to all those points," said Townsend.

"No, I connected up a kind of electrical broadcast from the radio!"

"*Radio!*" repeated Townsend. "There is no radio here!"

"There is!" said Pindobal, pointing to one of the least intricate of the masses of wire on one of the several pack-jammed tables. "I made one. I looked into the commercial radio at the Guest House. Then I spent a half hour at the radio in the Escritoria—"

"Another twist of the wrist!" groaned Kramer, adding hastily. "But you broadcast to all of your points, somehow amplified I suppose, from here?"

"No, each unit is separate!" said Pindobal. "I felt that if one of my units went out of order the others might continue and hold up my mountain of force—as a tent may

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remain up even when one or more uprights fall!"

"Meaning you have a radio like this at each system of points?" asked Kramer.

"Different," said Pindobal. "I found when I went to make the various radios that no two of them came out alike, so I made use of the divergent eccentricities of each!"

"Let's begin with the one on the roof of the laboratory," said Kramer, "and see what happens. Will you take down your grid or whatever you call it?"

"The Pindobal Point System," said Jose. "I just now named it."

Pindobal crawled to the roof of the laboratory while residents of Belterra, shivering in all their extra clothes, which were few enough at best and wholly inadequate, watched gloomily. Pindobal carried only a pair of pliers with which he quickly removed a piece of equipment, attached to an aerial which looked like a waffle iron with the points unnaturally and eccentrically raised. He handled it with loving care, slid down the roof and gave it into the hands of Kramer.

"It may be something new for world science," he said, just as another messenger boy with a blue slip came around the corner of the building, nodded and grinned at Pindobal, gave the slip to Townsend, who looked grimly up at Pindobal. "If I agree to four hundred a month," he said, "will you come on down and see what removing the Pindobal Point System does to the Pindobal winter?"

IT APPEARED to have done nothing at all, though Kramer felt that the snow was subsiding ever so slightly and the messenger boy effected to note a golden haze through it, as if the sun were trying to get through. That was all.

"I suppose," said Kramer, "we might have turned off your radio in the laboratory and saved all this work?"

"There is no way to turn it off," said Pindobal. "It just *works*. That's why the Pindobal Point System had to be removed. Four hundred dollars a month! How much is that per working hour?"

"The way you have always worked," said the messenger boy, "about two hundred dollars an hour! I figured it out on the way over!"

"We'd better get to Coracão," said Jose Pindobal hastily. "It takes half an hour. Shall I drive, Townsend?"

"I can manage the car," said Townsend, "but I can't see that this is doing any good at all. Maybe we'd better have in some more scientists!"

"All of whom, from wherever you get them," said Kramer, "would defer to me!"

No change happened in Pindobal's weather until the Ford Pick-up, in which Pindobal sat between Townsend and Kramer, was about halfway between Belterra Center and the area known as Coracão.

"Holy Ghost!" said Townsend. "Look there, to the right, toward the river!"

"Blizzard!" ejaculated Kramer. "I *know* blizzards! I spent the winter of Forty-seven and Forty-eight in New York City!"

To the right a wall of snow seemed to be in white unholy ferment, bringing darkness with it as it hurled itself toward the group in the car. Above the rattling of the motor rose the shrieking sound of the spinning snow.

As high as Kramer could see—he was on the near side of the car—the world above the earth seemed to be whirling mad. Rubber trees in the path of the wind were snapped off as if they had been fragile sticks of candy. Walls of them rose into the air and came riding on the rushing bosom of the blizzard straight at the car. They advanced on a front that extended out of sight ahead and behind.

Sweat burst out on the faces of all three men. Jose Pindobal crossed himself. Kramer swore. Townsend fought to keep the car on the road as the advance wind tugged and pulled at it, seeking to draw it into the ditches on either hand.

The blizzard struck the car with terrific force, almost turning it over. Kramer had raised his window, without much hope that the glass would endure, but by some miracle flying rubber trees passed over the car while the wind which carried them tried to twist the car apart. But the car had been soundly built. It held. Townsend couldn't see even through the windshield. He thrust his head out to the left, pulled it back, gasping.

"I can't even breathe outside," he said. "If there are any *seringueiros* out in this—"

"Why would they go out this morning?" Jose Pindobal asked reasonably.

"Would a *seringueiro* think *not* to?" asked Kramer.

"It is the one thing he could always be sure of doing," said Pindobal. "But if anybody *is* out he's a goner—and I'm to blame!"

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Nobody denied his wail of self-accusation as Charles Townsend fumbled his way along the road like a blindman, feeling with his tires for the tracks through the shrieking white wilderness. He turned on his lights—so much wasted effort as Pindobal did not fail to remind him.

There were flashes of dark hurrying forms, swinging across the road from the right.

"Wild pigs!" said Townsend. "Hundreds of them! The nearest forest on the right must be two miles away or more!"

Birds of many kinds began crashing blindly into the car. A jaguar broke from the smother, saw the car, vaulted the hood as lightly and unconcernedly as if it had been a fallen log in his path. A white deer, almost invisible in the smother, crashed into the car and fell back, its neck broken. Townsend halted, stepped out, retrieved the deer and tossed it into the back of the truck.

"Can you imagine," he was gasping when he returned to the cab, "what it is like ahead and behind beyond our range of vision? The wild creatures are trying to escape from this white catastrophe as they would flee from a forest fire. The Plantations will be filled with dead in no time if this blizzard is not turned off!"

"Your interest," said Jose Pindobal," is *rubber*!"

"Just how much of it do you think is left?" asked Townsend.

"Most of it," said Kramer. "This blizzard has to be of limited extent. We caused it by cutting out the Pindobal Point System at the laboratory. Different degrees of temperature and areas of high and low pressure."

"I've read weather reports!" snapped Townsend. "I don't know what causes weather any more than the people who make the reports!"

"At least I do not make reports," said Jose Pindobal. "I make the *weather*!"

BUT Townsend snorted. The trio never expected to see Coracão, but they reached it, white and miserable in the heart of the Plantations, not one human being in sight—pigs, ducks, chickens, cattle, sheep, dogs, cats, horses all gone, carried away by the blizzard or taken inside by their owners.

It looked like a village of the dead, but when they reached the church they found it packed with kneeling people, crowded close together for warmth, a fire which threatened to burn the church down around them blazing in the middle of the basilica. Townsend stepped inside, called out to them.

"No one must return home alone while the storm lasts," he said. "It is possible for a person to be lost in a smother like this within arm's length of his own door."

He knew they heard him and were comforted because he was the *Gerente* whom they had always regarded as all-powerful. If, now, he could turn off the terror they would all but worship him.

Townsend came out with Pindobal and Kramer and looked up the slant of the roof to the spot where Pindobal insisted he had set up his Pindobal Point System Extended. Snow whistled, whuffed crazily, and curled threateningly over the roof's comb. It was like a great rapids of white water smashing down an incline against a wilderness of rock and being hurled heavenward again. The roaring was terrific.

"The radio!" snapped Townsend. "Where is it?"

Pindobal stepped into the church, fired a question at the kneeling people about a mysterious maze of wire they must have seen near the altar. He got an answer, came back out.

"Pedro Mendes," he said, choking on the snow and shouting to make himself heard, "somehow connected the radio with the storm, so he threw it out in the snow! But he can't remember just where! If it develops that we have to do something to it, we'll have to find it!"

"If it's on this side," said Kramer, "the drift will be ten feet deep in another hour! Now I've got to get onto the roof or we'll get a volunteer from inside."

"It's a risk it's up to me to take," said Townsend. "Going up on that roof will be like swimming up a rapids. A rope thrown over from the other side, hanging down on this—"

Some of the people in the church now packed the door to watch and listen and Jose Pindobal played to the grandstand. He might never again have a chance.

"If anyone becomes a hero by climbing the roof," he said, "I shall be he!"

Townsend found a rope under the car seat. Kramer simply threw it up into the blizzard on the windward side. It vanished over the roof and Pindobal caught the end, started up hand over hand, feet flat against the wall of the church, body horizontal until he got his feet against the eaves, pushed his face

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into the curling noisy snow from on high and vanished from human ken save for the snapping about of the snowy end of the rope.

Ten minutes passed when the rope began whipping about to indicate that Pindobal no longer held it. Pindobal came crashing down the roof, somersaulted off it, landed in the rising drift of snow.

"A broken neck for sure!" yelled Kramer.

"A bid for glory!" yelled Townsend. "He knew he'd break his fall in the drift!"

Kramer pulled Pindobal out, stood him up, slapped him on the back. Pindobal could get out no word, but he held the Pindobal Point System extended in his arms, tightly clutched to his breast. A cheer rose from the people in the church door and Jose Pindobal bowed to them. All three went inside and down the aisle to the fire which the people were keeping up by feeding it the seats and benches of devotees.

The blizzard continued to roar.

"I tell you your messing around has nothing to do with this Amazonian phenomenon!" said Townsend. "If it had there would be a change."

As if his words were a signal there *was* a change. The sound of the blizzard altered suddenly, ominously. A pronounced chill, more sudden than any change in malarial chills, pushed inside, even to the edge of the roaring fire. The church windows began to crash inward to the floor, letting in the storm. People near the windows began to scream. The screaming extended throughout the church.

"Get under the windows against the wall!" shouted Townsend. "You'll have your brains hammered out if you don't! That's no longer snow but *hail*!"

"Hailstones as big as turtle eggs!" said Kramer.

"My messing around has nothing to do with this Amazonian phenomenon, eh?" said Jose Pindobal. "Do me the honor hereafter to refer to it as phenomena—*plural*!"

The windows on the opposite side of the church crashed outward and the storm really came in!

CHAPTER IV

Release From Terror

"THERE won't be a single leaf left on a single rubber tree!" said Townsend. "This hail will knock even our imported *tung* trees into splinters! And since it doesn't depend on the usual vagaries of the weather—but on the vagaries of one Jose Pindobal—it will probably continue just as it is or maybe become a little tougher!"

"We've got to get the Jose Pindobal Point Systems off the elevations at Porto Novo and Pindobal!" said Kramer. "The worst we can do is scramble everything up."

"The Porto Novo System is Jose Pindobal's Tapajos System," said Jose Pindobal. "The Pindobal System is Jose Pindobal's Pindobal System. That gives me, you'll notice, two opportunities to exploit my name, for none in the world will know that the Port of Pindobal is not, in actuality, Jose Pindobal himself! And Kramer is right, we must act at both places! We must travel fast!"

"These hailstones," said Townsend, "will smash the glass out of our windshield—if they haven't already done so—as if it were mica."

"I am not afraid to bare my bosom to them!" said Jose Pindobal. "If you can do less than that you do not merit being one with us patriotic Brasileiras!"

The three men hurried out to the car. The hailstones hammered at them, raising lumps on their bodies even where they were protected by pith helmets—against which helmets the stones struck with a sound akin to the sound made as they crashed against the walls of the little church.

Somehow the windshield held as the car swung into one of the snow-packed roads that led to the main road down to Pindobal. Again Townsend felt his way, for which miracle Kramer gave him credit though Jose Pindobal gave him none at all.

What was a miracle of driving to a weather-maker? Besides, Pindobal could drive without his hands on the wheel or looking at the road. He had done it several times, garagemen being thereby puzzled over what had happened to pool cars during the night when nobody was authorized to drive them.

The left side of Townsend's face looked like a raw steak as the hailstones curled into the car and hit him. Kramer on the right side of the car was in little better state. Jose Pindobal appeared more fortunate but he could see little or nothing. His feet were chilled from contact with hailstones which curved in the windows, hit either Townsend or Kramer and dropped to the floor,

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melting slowly in the heat of the motor.

Jose Pindobal could see enough however to realize that the car was moving through an area of "excessive disturbance." It seemed always the center of a whirlpool of snow, hail, even hints of rain, as if his weather making had given the Amazon all the weather even a genius could have thought of.

Jose Pindobal remembered that he had hoped inside him that if the weather gods did not give him what he asked, they might compromise and give him at least enough to make him famous, or help him get another job or at least to keep Maria from complaining because she had fewer bangles than some of the other Plantation women.

The hailstorm swung across the road to the left, then back to the right; then it came head-on to meet the car and it looked to Townsend as if the windshield bulged inward with its terrific force. Then the storm seemed to whipsaw from ahead, switch to the stern and worry the car from there. Then it would shift aloft and drive down straight as if it would crush the car flat in the road. On either hand the rubber trees twisted their limbs together and their crowns as if they were wringing their hands to keep them warm. Younger rubber trees broke off short. The car forged ahead through broken remnants of them.

Sometimes the storm stopped, formed an area of stillness all around the car, so that it was like a vacuum, that vacuum at the middle of a hurricane, which held their breaths, suffocated them so they could not breathe. Cold as they were sweat burst from their every pore to become icy when the storm changed again and possessed the car like a whirlwind of snowy elementals on a rampage.

JOSE PINDOBAL was afraid but he was also very proud. *He* had caused all this and sooner or later he would find a way with the help, perhaps, of his advisors—Kramer might even prove of some use—to cause the thing he had caused to become uncreated. Meanwhile it was a bedlam of bedlams and becoming momentarily worse. As the car bounced from side to side, jumped over trees half buried in the fused snow and hail, the weather seemed to keep pace. It bounced as the car bounced.

"Just what stations are your 'radios' connected with, *Senhor* Pindobal?" asked Kramer at last. "They must be connected with *some*thing, some station or other."

"They are," said Jose, "but I do not know with just which stations, except that they are all foreign, all four of them! You see, I picked my stations purely because they gave me languages I did not understand.

"Thus I had stations which could not interfere with my work as Brazilian stations might—as they would do when this is all over if the word came out that I had tapped the source of radio-energy which the government feels belongs solely to government officials and their close friends."

"Look, *Senhor* Pindobal," said Kramer exasperatedly. "You don't use the power of some foreign radio station to build up lines of force for a weather creator! How are your stations powered? Batteries? Tied in on the electrical circuit of the Plantations?"

"Mine," said Jose Pindobal," are connected with foreign stations! Since I connected them neither to batteries nor the company circuit and synchronized them with stations broadcasting languages I did not understand—"

"Which means," said Townsend, "that he has no idea what makes his radio broadcasting stations tick!"

"I do, though, Townsend," said Pindobal. "I told you. I connected them with speech I did not understand."

"And lo, a mountain came into being beyond the Tapajos!" said Townsend.

They came to the top of the grade down which Pindobal had recently traveled sidewise to the road leading left to Porto Novo. Townsend did little better, for the road was a shambles. *Babassu* palms had snapped off short and were lying helter skelter across the road. The storm seemed to have traveled just ahead of the Ford Pick-up, so that down ahead palms could be seen even now—twisted off by the whirling storm, fronds hammered to pulp by the hailstones—crashing into the road.

Townsend got through by a series of backs and fills, pushing the palms out of the way to right and left, turning the car into a kind of snowplow.

At Porto Novo, which place they reached at one in the afternoon, bedlam reigned as much as elsewhere. Cabins had been smashed flat by hailstones, windows broken, schooners in the harbor dismasted.

As Kramer and Townsend looked out across the frozen river while Pindobal took

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his Jose Pindobal Tapajos Point System down off the general store the hail hammered open a lead in the ice at the end of the dock, to show the green waters of the river below. The tail of the truck, Kramer remembered later, was pointed at that very spot because it was backed against a tree with one rear wheel, a tree that kept it from slipping down the steep incline to the frozen river.

The sort of weather which followed the Pindobal Tapajos Point System was out of the world entirely. It was patchy, impossible, weird, horrible. Beside an area where snow swirled, or hail formed a maelstrom of menace, the sun would be coming through as down a great shaft of light, so powerful that it erased the snow where it struck, showing mud beneath and water seeping away into the surrounding whiteness. Then as the car passed the spot the sun vanished, the funnel closed, the mud disappeared and snow or hail again possessed the little area.

They turned left to Pindobal and the weather went with them, stayed with them, becoming more and more nearly incomprehensible, jumping all bounds after Jose Pindobal had taken from the roof of the dock building his Jose Pindobal Pindobal Point System.

The weather had become a berserk maelstrom and Kramer was looking most queerly at Jose Pindobal. Pindobal began to realize that Kramer had somehow reached a reason for all that was happening. If he announced it before it came to Pindobal Pindobal was no longer a hero, a genius, a highly-paid physicist. He was just another small Brazilian who wanted to be but never would be, a big one.

Jose crossed himself.

"The point system's in the back of the truck!" he cried. "The storm is following us all the time, therefore we are its center and with us lie the causes or the cause. While we drive back I'm going to disconnect—"

"Let's take everything inside the *trapiche,*" said Kramer," and see what we can do there. First, you haven't the Belterra 'radio' or that maze of wires and madness you called a radio. The one you used at Coracão was heaved out into the snow. But all work, apparently, through your point systems and we *do* have all of those here. Let's get to work on them!"

"*I* shall work on them!" said Jose Pindobal. "You shall watch and perhaps learn something! It may be necessary for me not only to turn off the storm but also to turn *on* the sun! It is not likely, I agree, that I turned off the sun but miracles *do* happen when the mind of a genius is allowed full play."

PINDOBAL, while Kramer and Townsend watched, began to tinker with the mass of wires which comprised the Porto Novo "radio."

"Why don't you just break off the points of the Jose Pindobal Tapajos Point System?" asked Kramer.

"I, of course, thought of that long ago," said Jose Pindobal stiffly, "but it occurred to me as it appears not to have occurred to you, that if I did this and found that the radio continued to maintain the storm, I might need the points whereby to disconnect the radio! If I did not have them, then how could I re-erect them before sundown tonight, the deadline whereby most of the standing rubber trees might be saved? So I take apart the radio *first.*"

"A perfect Brazilian reason!" said Townsend. "And if, having taken apart the radio, you find that the points operate independently of it, then you will have to reassemble your radio?"

"In time, Townsend," said Pindobal," you might become an average physicist!

Jose Pindobal disassembled his Tapajos Point System radio, though thereafter neither Kramer nor Townsend could tell how. Then he went to the door of the *trapiche* and looked out, nodded gravely, broke off the points of the Tapajos Point System with a hammer.

He had noted that the weather was changing.

The effect on Jose Pindobal was utterly amazing. He screamed with delight, jumped up, kicked his heels together—then proceeded to smash all point systems and the other radio to bits.

"I can always reproduce the Jose Pindobal Point Systems for science!" he cried. "If they are intact Americans are certain to steal their working principles from me! Disassembled I shall not reassemble them without plenty of cash in advance—five hundred dollars at the very least!"

There was no denying that *most* of the "weather" had stopped. Enough so that all three knew that all that remained to be done was dismantle the radio at Belterra and the

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one which Pedro Mendes had thrown into the snow at Coracão.

The sun was turning the snow into a melting glare which sang musically as it tried to wash out the road over which they returned in triumph to Belterra. The weight of water from melting snow on the heights had no small effect on the ice which clogged the Tapajos, for the ice went out with a roar just as the three men reached the brilliant sunlit top of the Belterra Plateau. They quitted the car to look back as the ice went out, all three of them realizing that never within the life of living men would the Tapajos be thus seen again, with its ice going out!

The "mountain" beyond the Tapajos had vanished!

They reached the Belterra Laboratory to be met by scores of reporters who had managed to get through the blizzard to the landing field in a large variety of expensive airplanes.

One had revolutionized jungle flight by arriving in a helicopter!

The radio messenger boy was the first to greet Jose Pindobal—with a sheaf of pale blue slips, office radiograms. It was a thick sheaf.

"The biggest offer, *Senhor* Pindobal," said the messenger with great respect, "is one thousand dollars per month, over twenty thousand *cruzeiros!*"

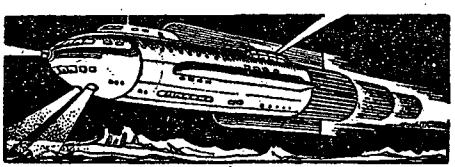
Jose Pindobal merely glanced at the radiograms, waved them aside.

"Later, son, later!" he said. "I must now allot some time to the press!" Jose Pindobal seated himself in the laboratory, through the windows of which now came the glory of the tropical sun, and reporters of many countries and colors began firing questions, the first of which was:

"What inspired you to produce snow and ice in the Amazon Valley?"

"Well, gentlemen," said Jose Pindobal, "I am a pure scientist as opposed to the positivist school. I realized that in order for pure science to come into its own, to come of age, to make itself known to the world, proof of its powers must be overwhelmingly produced!"

Jose Pindobal's eyes noted his "radio" on the table, still assembled. He turned briefly to *Gerente* Townsend and said, "Oh, Townsend, have this radio dismantled at once! And send one of my best qualified assistants to Coracão to dismantle the Jose Pindobal Universal Radio at that place! Move, man, celerity! Now, gentlemen, as I was saying. . . ."



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Men are game for hunters on a strange planet of the future

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OLD YANCEY was just about the meanest man in the world. I never seen a feller so downright, sot-in-his-ways, short-sighted, plain, ornery mean. What happened to him reminded me of what another feller told me oncet, quite a spell ago. Fergit exactly who it was—name of Louis, maybe, or could be Tamerlane—but one time he said he wisht the hull world had only one haid, so's he could chop it off.

Trouble with Yancey, he got to the point where he figgered everybody in the world was agin him, and blamed if he warn't right. That was a real spell of trouble, even for us Hogbens.

Oh, Yancey was a regular stinker, all right. The hull Tarbell family was bad-eyed, but Yancey made even them plumb disgusted. He lived up in a little one-room shanty back of the Tarbell place, and wouldn't let nobody near, except to push vittles through the cut-out moon in the door.

Those Fabulous Hogbens Defy Space and Time

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SEE YOU LATER

by

HENRY KUTTNER

"Shet up an' go 'way," Yancey said

Seems like some ten years back there was a new survey or something and the way it worked out, through some funny legal business, Yancey had to prove he'd got squatter's right on his land. He had to prove it by living there for a year or something. 'Bout then he had an argyment with his wife and moved out to the little shack, which was acrost the property line, and said he was a-gonna let the land go right back to the government, for all he cared, and that'd show the hull family. He knew his wife sot store by her turnip patch and was afraid the government would take it away.

The way it turned out, nobody wanted the land anyhow. It was all up and down and had too many rocks in it, but Yancey's wife kept on worritin' and beggin' Yancey to come back, which he was just too mean to do.

Yancey Tarbell couldn't have been uncommon comfortable up in that little shack,

Just to Get Old Yancey Tarbell's Debts Paid!

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but he was short-sighted as he was mean. After a spell Mrs. Tarbell died of being hit on the haid with a stone she was throwing up the slope at the shack, and it bounced back at her. So that left only the eight Tarbell boys and Yancey. He stayed right where he was, though.

He might have stayed there till he shriveled up and went to glory, except the Tarbells started feudin' with us. We stood it as long as we could; on account of they couldn't hurt us. Uncle Les, who was visitin' us, got skittery, though, and said he was tired of flying up like a quail, two or three miles in the air, every time a gun went off behind a bush. The holes in his hide closed up easy enough, but he said it made him dizzy, on account of the air bein' thinned out that high up.

THIS went on for a while, leastwise, and nobody got hurt, which seemed to rile the eight Tarbell boys. So one night they all come over in a bunch with their shootin' irons and busted their way in. We didn't want no trouble.

Uncle Lem, who's Uncle Les's twin except they was born quite a spell apart, he was asleep for the winter, off in a holler tree somewheres, so he was out of it. But the baby, bless his heart, is gittin' kind of awkward to shift around, bein' as how he's four hunnerd years old and big for his age—'bout three hunnerd pounds, I guess.

We could of all hid out or gone down to Piperville in the valley for a mite, but then there was Grandpaw in the attic, and I'd got sort of fond of the little perfesser feller we keep in a bottle. Didn't want to leave him on account of the bottle might of got smashed in the ruckus, if the eight Tarbell boys was likkered up enough.

The perfesser's cute—even though he never did have much sense. Used to say we was mutants, whatever they are, and kept shooting off his mouth about some people he knowed called chromosomes. Seems like they got mixed up with what the perfesser called hard radiations and had some young 'uns which was either dominant mutations or Hogbens, but I allus got it mixed up with the Roundhead plot, back when we was living in the old country. Course I don't mean the *real* old country. That got sunk.

So, seein' as how Grandpaw told us to lay low, we waited till the eight Tarbell boys busted down the door, and then we all went invisible, including the baby. Then we waited for the thing to blow over, only it didn't.

After stompin' round and ripping up things a lot, the eight Tarbell boys come down in the cellar. Now that was kind of bad, because we was caught by surprise. The baby had gone invisible, like I say, and so had the tank we keep him in, but the tank couldn't move round fast like we could.

One of the eight Tarbell boys went and banged into it and hit hisself a smart crack on the shank-bone. How he cussed! It was shameful for a growin' boy to hear, except Grandpaw kin outcuss anybody I ever heard, so I didn't larn nothing.

Well—he cussed a lot, jumped around, and all of a sudden his squirrel rifle went off. Must have had a hair-trigger. That woke up the baby, who got scared and let out a yell. It was the blamedest yell I'd ever heerd out of the baby yet, and I've seen men go all white and shaky when he bellers. Our perfesser-feller told us oncet the baby emitted a subsonic. Imagine!

Anyhow, seven of the eight Tarbell boys dropped daid, all in a heap, without even time to squeal. The eighth one was up at the haid of the cellar steps, and he got all quivery and turned around and ran. I guess he was so dizzy he didn't know where he was heading. 'Fore he knowed it, he was up in the attic, where he stepped right square on Grandpaw.

Now the fool thing was this: Grandpaw was so busy telling us what to do he'd entirely forgot to go invisible hisself. And I guess one look at Grandpaw just plumb finished the eighth Tarbell boy. He fell right down daid as a skun coon. Cain't imagine why, though I got to admit Grandpaw wasn't lookin' his best that week. He'd been sick.

"You all right, Grandpaw?" I asked, sort of shaking him out. He cussed me.

"'Twarn't my fault," I told him.

"'Sblood!" he said, madlike. "What rabble of canting jolt-heads have I sired? Put me down, you young scoundrel." So I put him back on the gunnysack and he turned around a couple of times and shut his eyes. After that, he said he was going to take a nap and not to wake him up for nothing, bar Judgment Day. He meant it, too.

So we had to figger out for ourselves what was best to do. Maw said it warn't our fault, and all we could do was pile the

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eight Tarbell boys in a wheelbarrow and take 'em back home, which I done. Only I got to feeling kind of shy on the way, on account of I couldn't figger out no real polite way to mention what had happened. Besides, Maw had told me to break the news gentle. "Even a polecat's got feelings," she said.

SO I left the wheelbarrow with the eight Tarbell boys in it behind some scrub brush, and I went on up the slope to where I could see Yancey sittin', airin' hisself out in the sun and reading a book. I still hadn't studied out what to say. I just traipsed along slowlike, whistling *Yankee Doodle.* Yancey didn't pay me no mind for a while.

He's a little mean dirty man with chin whiskers. Couldn't be much more'n five feet high. There was tobacco juice on his whiskers, but I might have done old Yancey wrong in figgerin' he was only sloppy. I heard he used to spit in his beard to draw flies, so's he could ketch 'em and pull off their wings.

Without looking, he picked up a stone and flang it past my head. "Shet up an' go 'way," he said.

"Just as you say, Mister Yancey," I told him, mighty relieved, and started to. But then I remembered Maw would probably whup me if I didn't mind her orders, so I sort of moved around quiet till I was in back of Yancey and looking over his shoulder at what he was readin'. It looked like a book. Then I moved around a mite more till I was up-wind of him.

He started cacklin' in his whiskers.

"That's a real purty picture, Mister Yancey," I said.

He was gigglin' so hard it must of cheered him up.

"Ain't it, though," he said, banging his fist on his skinny old rump. "My, my! Makes me feel full o' ginger just to look at it!"

It wasn't a book, though. It was a magazine, the kind they sell down at the village, and it was opened at a picture. The feller that made it could draw real good. Not so good as an artist I knowed once, over in England. He went by the name of Crookshank or Crookback or something like that, unless I'm mistook.

Anyway, this here that Yancey was lookin' at, was quite a picture. It showed a lot of fellers, all exactly alike, coming out of a big machine which I could tell right off wouldn't work. But all these fellers was as like as peas in a pod. Then there was a red critter with bugged-out eyes grabbing a girl, I dunno why. It was sure purty.

"Wisht something like that could really happen," Yancey said.

"It ain't so hard," I told him. "Only that gadget's all wrong. All you need is a wash basin and some old scrap iron."

"Hey?"

"That thing there," I said. "The jigger that looks like it's making one feller into a hull lot of fellers. It ain't built right."

"I s'pose you could do it better?" he snapped, sort of mad.

"We did, once," I said. "I forget what Paw had on his mind, but he owed a man name of Cadmus a little favor. Cadmus wanted a lot of fighting-men in a real hurry, so Paw fixed it so's Cadmus could split hisself up into a passel of soldiers. Shucks. I could do it myself."

"What are you blabberin' about?" Yancey asked. "You ain't lookin' at the right thing. This here red critter's what I mean. See what he's a-gonna do? Gonna chaw that there purty gal's haid off, looks like. See the tusks on him? Heh, heh, heh. I wisht I was a critter like that. I'd chaw up plenty of people."

"You wouldn't chaw up your own kin, though, I bet," I said, seein' a way to break the news gentle.

" 'Tain't right to bet," he told me. "Allus pay your debts, fear no man, and don't lay no wagers. Gamblin's a sin. I never made no bets and I allus paid my debts." He stopped, scratched his whiskers, and sort of sighed. "All except'n one," he added, frowning.

"What was that?"

"Oh, I owed a feller something. Only I never could locate him afterwards. Must be nigh on thutty years ago. Seems like I got likkered up and got on a train. Guess I robbed somebody, too, 'cause I had a roll big enough to choke a hoss. Never tried that, come to think of it. You keep hosses?"

"No, sir," I said. "We was talking about your kin."

"Shet up," old Yancey said. "Well, now, I had myself quite a time." He licked his whiskers. "Ever heard tell of a place called New York? In some furrin' country, I guess. Can't understand a word nobody says. Anyway, that's where I met up with this feller. I often wisht I could find him

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again. An honest man like me hates to think of dyin' without payin' his lawful debts."

"Did your eight boys owe any debts?" I asked.

He squinted at me, slapped his skinny laig, and nodded.

"Now I know," he said. "Ain't you the Hogben boy?"

"That's me. Saunk Hogben."

"I heard tell 'bout you Hogbens. All witches, ain't you?"

"No, sir."

"I heard what I heard. Hull neighborhood's buzzin'. Hexers, that's what. You get outa here, go on, git!"

"I'm a-goin'," I said. "I just come by to say it's real unfortunate you couldn't chaw up your own kin if'n you was a critter like in that there picture."

"Ain't nobody big enough to stop me!"

"Maybe not," I said, "but they've all gone to glory."

WHEN he heard this, old Yancey started to cackle. Finally, when he got his breath back, he said, "Not them! Them varmints have gone plumb smack to perdition, right where they belong. How'd it happen?"

"It was sort of an accident," I said. "The baby done kilt seven of them and Grandpaw kilt the other, in a way of speakin'. No harm intended."

"No harm done," Yancey said, cackling again.

"Maw sent her apologies and what do you want done with the remains? I got to take the wheelbarrow back home."

"Take 'em away. I don't want 'em. Good riddance to bad rubbish," old Yancey said, so I said all right and started off. But then he yelled out and told me he'd changed his mind. Told me to dump 'em where they was. From what I could make out, which wasn't much because he was laffin' so hard, he wanted to come down and kick 'em.

So I done like he said and then went back home and told Maw, over a mess of catfish and beans and pot-likker. She made some hush puppies, too. They was good. I sot back, figgerin' I'd earned a rest, and thunk a mite, feelin' warm and nice around the middle. I was trying to figger what a bean would feel like, down in my tummy. But it didn't seem to have no feelin's.

It couldn't of been more than a half hour later when the pig yelled outside like he was gettin' kicked, and then somebody knocked on the door. It were Yancey. Minute he come in, he pulled a bandanna out of his britches and started snifflin'. I looked at Maw, wide-eyed. I couldn't tell her nothin'.

Paw and Uncle Les was drinkin' corn in a corner, and gigglin' a mite. I could tell they was feelin' good because of the way the table kept rocking, the one between them. It wasn't touching neither one, but it kept jigglin', trying to step fust on Paw's toes and then on Uncle Les'. They was doing it inside their haids, trying to ketch the other one off guard.

It was up to Maw, and she invited old Yancey to set down a spell and have some beans. He just sobbed.

"Something wrong, neighbor?" Maw asked, polite.

"It shore is," Yancey said, sniffling. "I'm a real old man."

"You surely are," Maw told him. "Mebbe not as old as Saunk here, but you look awful old."

"Hey?" Yancey said, staring at her. "Saunk? Saunk ain't more'n seventeen, big as he is."

Maw near looked embarrassed. "Did I say Saunk?" she covered up, quicklike. "I meant this Saunk's Grandpaw. His name's Saunk too." It wasn't, even Grandpaw don't remember what his name was first, it's been so long. But in his time he's used a lot of names like Elijah and so forth. I ain't even sure they had names in Atlantis, where Grandpaw come from in the first place. Numbers or somethin'. It don't signify, anyhow.

Well, seems like old Yancey kept snufflin' and groanin' and moanin', and made out like we'd kilt his eight boys and he was all alone in the world. He hadn't cared a mite half an hour ago, though, and I said so. But he pointed out he hadn't rightly understood what I was talkin' about then, and for me to shet up.

"Ought to had a bigger fam'ly," he said. "They used to be two more boys, Zeb and Robbie, but I shot 'em one time. Didn't like the way they was lookin' ory-eyed at me. The point is, you Hogbens ain't got no right to kill my boys."

"We didn't go for to do it," Maw said. "It was more or less an accident. We'd be right happy to make it up to you, one way or another."

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"That's what I was countin' on," old Yancey said. "It seems like the least you could do, after acting up like you done. It don't matter whether the baby kilt my boys, like Saunk says and he's a liar. The idea is that I figger all you Hogbens are responsible. But I guess we could call it square if'n you did me a little favor. It ain't really right for neighbors to hold bad feelings."

"Any favor you name," Maw said, "if it ain't out of line."

" 'Tain't much," old Yancey said. "I just want you to split me up into a rabble, sort of temporary."

"Hey, you been listening to Medea?" Paw said, being drunk enough not to know no better. "Don't you believe her. That was purely a prank she played on Pelias. After he got chopped up he stayed daid, he didn't git young like she said he would."

"Hey?" Yancey said. He pulled that old magazine out of his pocket and it fell open right to that purty picture. "This here," he said. "Saunk tells me you kin do it. And everybody round here knows you Hogbens are witches. Saunk said you done it once with a feller name of Messy."

"Guess he means Cadmus," I said.

YANCEY waved the magazine. I saw he had a queer kind of gleam in his eye.

"It shows right here," he said, wildlike. "A feller steps inside this here gimmick and then he keeps coming out of it, dozens of him, over and over. Witchcraft. Well, I know about you Hogbens. You may fool the city folk, but you don't fool me none. You're all witches."

"We ain't," Paw said from the corner. "Not no more."

"You are so," Yancey said. "I heard stories. I even seen him—" He pointed right at Uncle Les. "I seen him flying around in the air. And if that ain't witchcraft I don't know what is."

"Don't you, honest?" I asked. "That's easy. It's when you get some—"

But Maw told me to shet up.

"Saunk told me you kin do it," he said. "An' I been sittin' and studyin' and lookin' over this here magazine. I got me a fine idea. Now it stands to reason, everybody knows a witch kin be in two places at the same time. Couldn't a witch mebbe git to be in three places at the same time?"

"Three's as good as two," Maw said. "Only there ain't no witches. It's like this here science you hear tell about. People make it up out of their haids. It ain't natcheral."

"Well, then," Yancey said, putting the magazine down. "Two or three or a hull passel. How many people are there in the world, anyway?"

"Two billion, one hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen," I said.

"Then—"

"Hold on a minute," I said. "Now it's two billion, one hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and twenty. Cute little tyke, too."

"Boy or girl?" Maw asked.

"Boy," I told her.

"Then why can't you make me be in two billion whatever it was places at the same time? Mebbe for just a half a minute or so. I ain't greedy. That'd be long enough, anyhow."

"Long enough for what?" Maw asked.

Yancey give me a sly look. "I got me a problem," he said. "I want to find a feller. Trouble is, I dunno I kin find him now. It's been a awful long time. But I got to, somehow or other. I ain't a-gonna rest easy in my grave unless I done paid all my debts, and for thutty years I been owin' this feller somethin. It lays heavy on my conscience."

"That's right honorable of you, neighbor," Maw said.

Yancey snuffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"It's a-gonna be a hard job," he said. "I put it off mebbe a mite too long. The thing is, I was figgerin' on sendin' my eight boys out to look for this feller some time, so you kin see why it's busted me all up, the way them no-good varmints up and got kilt without no warning. How am I gonna find that feller I want now?"

Maw looked troubled and passed Yancey the jug.

"Whoosh!" he said, after a snort. "Tastes like real hellfire for certain. Whoosh!" Then he took another swig, sucked in some air, and scowled at Maw.

"If'n a man plans on sawing down a tree and his neighbor bust the saw, seems to me that neighbor ought to lend his own saw. Ain't that right?"

"Sure is," Maw said. "Only we ain't got eight boys to lend you."

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"You got something better," Yancey said. "Black, wicked magic, that's what. I ain't sayin' yea or nay 'bout that. It's your own affair. But seein' as how you kilt off them wuthless young 'uns of mine, so's I can't do like I was intendin'—why, then it looks like you ought to be willing to help me in some other way. 'Long as I kin locate that feller and pay him what I owe him, I'm satisfied. Now ain't it the gospel truth that you kin split me up into a passel of me-critters?"

"Why, I guess we kin do that, I s'pose," Maw said.

"An' ain't it gospel that you kin fix it so's every dang one of them me-critters will travel real fast and see everybody in the hull entire world?"

"That's easy," I said.

"If'n I kin git to do that," Yancey said, "it'd be easy for me to spot that feller and give him what he's got comin' to him." He snuffled. "I allus been honest. I'm skeered of dyin' unless I pay all my debts fust. Danged if'n I want to burn through all e-ternity like you sinful Hogbens are a-gonna."

"Shucks," Maw said, "I guess we kin help out, neighbor, bein' as how you feel so het-up about it. Yes, sir, we'll do like you want."

Yancey brightened up considerable.

"Promise?" he asked. "Swear it, on your word an' honor?"

Maw looked kind of funny, but Yancey pulled out his bandanna again, so she busted down and made her solemn promise. Right away Yancey cheered up.

"How long will the spell take?" he asked.

"There ain't no spell," I said. "Like I told you, all I need is some scrap iron and a wash basin. 'Twon't take long."

"I'll be back real soon," Yancey said, sort of cackling, and run out, laffin' his haid off. Goin' through the yard he kicked out at a chicken, missed, and laffed some more. Guess he was feelin' purty good.

"You better go on and make that gadget so's it'll be ready," Maw told me. "Git goin'."

"Yes, Maw," I said, but I sot there for a second or two, studyin'. She picked up the broomstick.

"You know, Maw—"

"Well?"

"Nothin'," I said, and dodged the broomstick. I went on out, trying to git clear what was troublin' me. Something was, only I couldn't tell what. I felt kind of unwillin' to make that there gadget, which didn't make right good sense, since there didn't seem to be nothing really wrong.

I WENT out behind the woodshed, though, and got busy. Took me 'bout ten minutes, but I didn't hurry much. Then I come back to the house with the gadget and said I was done. Paw told me to shet up.

Well, I sot there and looked at the gimmick and still felt trouble on my mind. Had to do with Yancey, somehow or other. Finally I noticed he'd left his old magazine behind, so I picked it up and started reading the story right under that picture, trying to make sense out of it. Durned if I could.

It was all about some crazy hillbillies who could fly. Well, that ain't no trick, but what I couldn't figger out was whether the feller that writ it was trying to be funny or not. Seems to me people are funny enough anyhow, without trying to make 'em funnier.

Besides, serious things ought to be treated serious, and from what our perfesser feller told me once, there's an awful lot of people what really believe in science and take it tremendous serious. He allus got a holy light in his eye when he talked about it. The only good thing about that story, it didn't have no girls in it. Girls make me feel funny.

I didn't seem to be gittin' nowheres, so I went down to the cellar and played with the baby. He's kind of big for his tank these days. He was glad to see me. Winked all four of his eyes at me, one after the other. Real cute.

But all the time there was something about that magazine that kept naggin' at me. I felt itchy inside, like when before they had that big fire in London, some while ago. Quite a spell of sickness they had then, too.

It reminded me of something Grandpaw had told me once, that he'd got the same sort of skitters just before Atlantis foundered. Course, Grandpaw kin sort of look into the future—which ain't much good, really, on account of it keeps changing around. I can't do that myself yet. I ain't growed up enough. But I had a kind of hunch that something real bad was around, only it hadn't happened quite yet.

I almost decided to wake up Grandpaw, I felt so troubled. But around then I heard trompin' upstairs, so I clomb up to the kitchen, and there was Yancey, swiggin'

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down some corn Maw'd give him. Minute I looked at the old coot, I got that feelin' agin.

Yancey said "Whoosh!", put down the jug, and wanted to know if we was ready. So I pointed at the gadget I'd fixed up and said that was it, all right, and what did he think about it?

"That little thing?" Yancey asked. "Ain't you a-gonna call up Old Scratch?"

"Ain't no need," Uncle Les said. "Not with you here, you little water moccasin, you."

Yancey looked right pleased. "That's me," he said. "Mean as a moccasin, and fulla pizen. How does it work?"

"Well," I said, "it sort of splits you up into a lot of Yanceys, is all."

Paw had been settin' quiet, but he must of tuned in inside the haid of some perfesser somewheres, on account of he started talkin' foolish. He don't know any four-bit words hisself.

I wouldn't care to know 'em myself, bein' as how they only mix up what's simple as cleanin' a trout.

"Each human organism," Paw said, showing off like crazy, "is an electro-magnetic machine, emitting a pattern of radiations, both from brain and body. By reversing polarity each unit of you, Yancey, will be automatically attracted to each already-existent human unit, since unlikes attract. But first you will step on Saunk's device and your body will be broken down—"

"Hey," Yancey yelped.

Paw went right on, proud as a peacock.

"—into a basic electronic matrix, which can then be duplicated to the point of infinity, just as a type-face may print millions of identical copies of itself in reverse—negative instead of positive.

"Since space is no factor where electronic wave-patterns are concerned, each copy will be instantly attracted to the space occupied by every other person in the world," Paw was goin' on, till I like to bust. "But since two objects cannot occupy the same space-time, there will be an automatic spacial displacement, and each Yancey-copy will be repelled to approximately two feet away from each human being."

"You forgot to draw a pentagram," Yancey said, looking around nervouslike. "That's the awfullest durn spell I ever heard in all my born days. I thought you said you wasn't gonna call up Old Scratch?"

MAYBE it was on account of Yancey was lookin' oncommon like Old Scratch hisself just then, but I just couldn't stand it no longer—having this funny feeling inside me. So I woke up Grandpaw. I did it inside my haid, the baby helpin', so's nobody noticed. Right away there was a stirrin' in the attic, and Grandpaw heaved hisself around a little and woke up. Next thing I knew he was cussing a blue streak.

Well, the hull fam'ly heard that, even though Yancey couldn't. Paw stopped showin' off and shet up.

"Dullards!" Grandpaw said, real mad. "Rapscallions! Certes, y-wist it was no wonder I was having bad dreams. Saunk, you've put your foot in it now. Have you no sense of process? Didn't you realize what this caitiff shmo was planning, the stinkard? Get in the groove, Saunk, ere manhood's state shall find thee unprepared." Then he added something in Sanskrit. Livin' as long as Grandpaw has, he gits mixed up in his talk sometimes.

"Now Grandpaw," Maw thunk, "what's Saunk been and done?"

"You've all done it," Grandpaw yelled. "Couldn't you add cause and effect? Saunk, what of the picture y-wrought in Yancey's pulp mag? Wherefore hys-sodein change of herte, when obviously the stinkard hath no more honor than a lounge lizard? Do you want the world depopulated before its time? Ask Yancey what he's got in his britches pocket, dang you!"

"Mister Yancey," I said, "what have you got in your britches pocket?"

"Hey?" he said, reaching down and hauling out a big, rusty monkey-wrench. "You mean this? I picked it up back of the shed." He was lookin' real sly.

"What you aimin' to do with that?" Maw asked, quick.

Yancey give us all a mean look. "Ain't no harm tellin' you," he said. "I aim to hit everybody, every durn soul in the hull entire world, right smack on top of the haid, and you promised to help me do it."

"Lawks a-mercy," Maw said.

"Yes, siree," Yancey giggled. "When you hex me, I'm a-gonna be in every place everybody else is, standing right behind 'em. I'll whang 'em good. Thataway, I kin be sure I'll git even. One of them people is just bound to be the feller I want, and he'll git what I been owin' him for thutty years."

"What feller?" I said. "You mean the one

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you met up with in New York, you was telling me about? I figgered you just owed him some money."

"Never said no sech thing," Yancey snapped. "A debt's a debt, be it money or a bust in the haid. Ain't nobody a-gonna step on my corn and git away with it, thutty years or no thutty years."

"He stepped on your corn?" Paw asked. "That's all he done?"

"Yup. I was likkered up at the time, but I recollect I went down some stairs to where a lot of trains was rushing around under the ground."

"You was drunk," Paw chimed in.

"I sure was," Yancey said. "Couldn't be no sech thing—trains runnin' underground! But I sure as shootin' wasn't dreamin' 'bout the feller what stepped on my corn. Why, I kin still feel it. I got mad. It was so crowded I couldn't even move for a mite, and I never even got a good look at the feller what stepped on me.

"By the time I hit out with my stick, he must of got away. Never knew what he looked like. Might have been a female, but that don't signify. I just ain't a-gonna die till I pay my debts and git even with everybody what ever done me dirt. I allus got even with every dang soul what done me wrong, and most everybody I ever met did."

RILED up a hull lot was Yancey Tarbell. He went right on from there:

"So I figgered, since I never found out just who this feller was what stepped on my corn, I better make downright sure and take a lick at everybody, man, woman, and child."

"Now you hold your hosses," I said. "Ain't no children could have been alive thutty years ago, an' you know it."

"Makes no difference," Yancey snapped. "I was a-thinkin', and I got an awful idea. Suppose that feller went and died? Thutty years is a long time. But then I figgered, even if he did up and die, chances are he got married and had kids fust. If'n I can't git even with him, I kin git even with his chillun. The sins of the father—that's Scripture. If'n I hit everybody in the world, I can't go fur wrong."

"You ain't hitting no Hogbens," Maw said. "None of us been in New York since afore you was born. I mean, we ain't never been there. So you kin just leave us out of it. How'd you like to git a million dollars instead? Or maybe you want to git young again or something like that? We kin fix that for you instead, if you'll give up this here wicked idea."

"I ain't a-gonna," Yancey said, stubborn. "You give your gospel word to help me."

"Well, we ain't bound to keep a promise like that," Maw said, but then Grandpaw chimed in from the attic.

"The Hogben word is sacred," he told us. "It's our bond. We must keep our promise to this booby. But, having kept it, we are not bound farther."

"Oh?" I said, sort of gittin' a thought. "That bein' the case—Mister Yancey, just what did we promise, exact?"

He waved the monkey wrench at me.

"I'm a-gonna git split up into as many people as they are people in the world, and I'm a-gonna be standing right beside all of 'em. You give your word to help me do that. Don't you try to wiggle out of it."

"I ain't wigglin'," I said. "Only we better git it clear, so's you'll be satisfied and won't have no kick comin'. One thing, though. You got to be the same size as everybody you visit."

"Hey?"

"I kin fix it easy. When you step on this here gadget, there'll be two billion, one hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and twenty Yanceys all over the world. S'posin', now, one of these here Yanceys finds himself standing next to a big feller seven feet tall? That wouldn't be so good, would it?"

"I want to be eight feet high," Yancey said.

"No, sir. The Yancey who goes to visit a feller that high is a-gonna be just that high hisself, exactly. And the one who visits a baby only two feet high is a-gonna be only two feet high hisself. What's fair's fair. You agree to that, or it's all off. Only other thing, you'll be just exactly as strong as the feller you're up agin."

I guess he seen I was firm. He hefted the monkey wrench.

"How'll I git back?" he asked.

"We'll take care of that," I said. "I'll give you five seconds. That's long enough to swing a monkey wrench, ain't it?"

"It ain't very long."

"If'n you stay longer, somebody might hit back."

"So they might," he said, turnin' pale under the dirt. "Five seconds is plenty."

"Then if'n we do just that, you'll be satis-

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fied? You won't have no kick comin'?"

He swung the monkey wrench and laffed.

"Suits me fine and dandy," he said. "I'll bust their haids good. Heh, heh, heh."

"Then you step right on here," I said, showin' him. "Wait a mite, though. I better try it fust, to make sure it works right."

I picked up a stick of firewood from the box by the stone and winked at Yancey. "You git set," I said. "The minute I git back, you step right on here."

Maw started to say something, but all of a sudden Grandpaw started laffin' in the attic. I guess he was lookin' into the future again.

I stepped on the gadget, and it worked slick as anything. Afore I could blink, I was split up into two billion, one hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen Saunk Hogbens.

There was one short, o' course, on account of I left out Yancey, and o' course the Hogbens ain't listed in no census. But here I was, standin' right in front of everybody in the hull entire world except the Hogben fam'ly and Yancey hisself. It was plumb onreasonable.

NEVER did I know there was so many faces in this world! They was all colors, some with whiskers, some without, some with clothes on, same naked as needles, some awful big and some real short, and half of them was in daylight and half was in the night time. I got downright dizzy.

For just a flash, I thought I could make out some of the people I knowed down in Piperville, including the sheriff, but he got mixed up with a lady in a string of beads who was chasing a kangaroo-critter, and she turned into a man dressed up fit to kill who was speechifyin' in a big room somewheres.

My, I was dizzy.

I got a-hold of myself and it was about time, too, for just about then near everybody in the hull world noticed me. Course, it must have looked like I'd popped out of thin air, right in front of them, real sudden, and —well, you ever had near two billion, a hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen people looking you right square in the eye? It's just awful. I forgot what I'd been intending. Only I sort of heard Grandpaw's voice telling me to hurry up.

So I pushed that stick of firewood I was holding, only now it was two billion, a hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen sticks, into just about the same number of hands and let go. Some of the people let go too, but most of 'em held on to it. Then I tried to remember the speech I was a-gonna make, telling 'em to git in the fust lick at Yancey afore he could swing that monkey wrench.

But I was too confounded. It was funny. Having all them people looking right at me made me so downright shy, I couldn't even open my mouth. What made it worse was that Grandpaw yelled I had only one second left, so there wasn't even time to make a speech. In just one second, I was a-gonna flash back to our kitchen, and then old Yancey was all ready to jump in the gadget and swing that monkey wrench. And I hadn't warned nobody. All I'd done was give everybody a little old stick of firewood.

My, how they stared! I felt plumb naked. Their eyes bugged right out. And just as I started to thin out around the edges like a biscuit, I—well, I don't know what come over me. I guess it was feeling so oncommon shy. Maybe I shouldn't of done it, but—

I done it!

Then I was back in the kitchen. Grandpaw was laffin' fit to kill in the attic. The old gentleman's got a funny kind of sense of humor, I guess. I didn't have no time for him then, though, for Yancey jumped past me and into the gadget. And he disappeared into thin air, the way I had. Split up, like I'd been, into as many people as there was in the world, and standing right in front of 'em.

Maw and Paw and Uncle Les was looking at me real hard. I sort of shuffled.

"I fixed it," I said. "Seems like a man who's mean enough to hit little babies over the haid deserves what he's"—I stopped and looked at the gadget "—what he's been and got," I finished, on account of Yancey had tumbled out of thin air, and a more whupped-up old rattlesnake I never seen. My!

Well, I guess purty near everybody in the hull world had took a whang at Mister Yancey. He never even had a chance to swing that monkey wrench. The hull world had got in the fust lick.

Yes, siree. Mister Yancey looked plumb ruined.

But he could still yell. You could of heard him a mile off. He kept screamin' that

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he'd been cheated. He wanted another chance, and this time he was taking his shootin'-iron and a bowie knife. Finally Maw got disgusted, took him by the collar, and shook him up till his teeth rattled.

"Quotin' Scripture!" she said, madlike. "You little dried-up scraggle of downright pizen! The Good Book says an eye for an eye, don't it? We kept our word, and there ain't nobody kin say different."

"That's the truth, certes," Grandpaw chimed in from the attic.

"You better go home and git some arnicy," Maw said, shakin' Yancey some more. "And don't you come round here no more, never again, or we'll set the baby on you."

"But I didn't git even!" Yancey squalled.

"I guess you ain't a-gonna, ever," I said. "You just can't live long enough to git even with everybody in the hull world, Mister Yancey."

BY AND BY, that seemed to strike Yancey all in a heap. He turned a rich color like beet soup, made a quackin' noise, and started cussin'. Uncle Les reached for the poker, but there wasn't no need.

"The hull dang world done me wrong!" Yancey squealed, and clapped his hands to his haid. "I been flummoxed! Why in tarnation did they hit me fust? There's something funny about—"

"Hush up," I said, all of a sudden realizing the trouble wasn't over, like I'd thought. "Listen. Anybody hear anything from the village?"

Even Yancey shet up whilst we listened. "Don't hear a thing," Maw said.

"Saunk's right," Grandpaw put in. "That's what's wrong."

Then everybody got it, that is, everybody except Yancey. Because about now there ought to of been quite a rumpus down at Piperville. Don't forgit me and Yancey went visitin' the hull world, which includes Piperville, and people don't take a thing like that quiet. There ought to of been some yellin' going on, at least.

"What are you all standin' round dumb as mutes for?" Yancey busted out. "You got to help me git even!"

I didn't pay him no mind. I sot down and studied the gadget. After a minute I seen what it was I'd done wrong. I guess Grandpaw seen it about as quick as I did. You oughta heard him laff. I hope it done the old gentleman good. He has a right peculiar sense of humor sometimes.

"I sort of made a mistake in this gadget, Maw," I said. "That's why it's so quiet down in Piperville."

"Aye, by my troth," Grandpaw said, still laffing. "Saunk had best seek cover. Twenty-three skiddoo, kid."

"You done something you shouldn't, Saunk?" Maw said.

"Blabber blabber blabber," Yancey yelled. "I want my rights. I want to know what it was Saunk done that made everybody in the world hit me over the haid! He must of done something. I never had no time to—"

"Now you leave the boy alone, Mister Yancey," Maw said. "We done what we promised, and that's enough. You git outa here and simmer down afore you say something you regret."

Paw winked at Uncle Les, and before Yancey could yell back at Maw the table sort of bent its laigs down like they had knees in 'em and snuck up behind Yancey real quiet. Then Paw said to Uncle Les, "All together now, let 'er go!" and the table straightened up its laigs and give Yancey a turrible bunt that sent him flying out the door.

The last we heard of Yancey was the whoops he kept lettin' out whenever he hit the ground all the way down the hill. He rolled half the way to Piperville, I found out later. And when he got there he started hittin' people over the haid with his monkey wrench.

I guess he figgered he might as well make a start the hard way.

They put him in jail for a spell to cool off, and I guess he did, 'cause afterward he went back to that little shack of his'n. I hear he don't do nothin' but set around with his lips movin', trying to figger a way to git even with the hull world. I don't calc'late he'll ever hit on it, though.

At that time, I wasn't payin' him much mind. I had my own troubles. As soon as Paw and Uncle Les got the table back in place, Maw lit into me again.

"Tell me what happened, Saunk," she said. "I'm afeard you done something wrong when you was in that gadget. Remember you're a Hogben, son. You got to behave right when the hull world's lookin' at you. You didn't go and disgrace us in front of the entire human race, did you, Saunk?"

Grandpaw laffed agin. "Not yet, he

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hasn't," he said. Then down in the basement I heard the baby give a kind of gurgle and I knowed he could see it too. That's surprisin', kinda. We never know for sure about the baby. I guess he really kin see a little bit into the future too.

"I just made a little mistake, Maw," I said. "Could happen to anybody. It seems the way I fixed that gadget up, it split me into a lot of Saunks, all right, but it sent me ahead into next week too. That's why there ain't no ruckus yet down in Piperville."

"My land!" Maw said. "Child, you do things so careless!"

"I'm sorry, Maw," I said. "Trouble is, too many people in Piperville know me. I'd better light out for the woods and pick me a nice holler tree. I'll be needin, it, come next week."

"Saunk," Maw said, "you been up to somethin'. Sooner or later I'll find out, so you might as well tell me now."

Well, shucks, I knowed she was right. So I told her, and I might as well tell you, too. You'll find out anyhow, come next week. It just shows you can't be too careful. This day week, everybody in the hull world is a-gonna be mighty surprised when I show up out of thin air, hand 'em all a stick of firewood, and then r'ar back and spit right smack in their eye.

I s'pose that there two billion, one hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen includes everybody on earth.

Everybody!

Sometime next week, I figger.

See you later.

WONDER ODDITIES

WATER, according to General Electric research laboratories, does not freeze at the so-called "freezing point" but, when free of tiny particles and other impurities which serve as nuclei for ice formation, will not begin to crystallize into ice until it reaches a temperature of zero Fahrenheit.

ONLY lead-sheathed electric cables are practical for long term use underground. The ordinary rubber-insulated cables have been found to have a comparatively short life as they suffer from the depredations of bacteria in the soil.

NO SHORTAGE of uranium for the atomic age is foreseen by U. S. Atomic Energy Commission Chairman David E. Lilienthal, who states that currently available fields offer plenty of the precious radioactive metal, and the current prospecting boom promises to discover many new fields that may well top the gold prospecting of the last century in profits.

DISCOVERIES of anthropoid fossil bones in South Africa have caused reversals in certain well-established theories of human evolution. Artifacts found close to bones of what were hitherto believed to have been manlike apes have caused scientists to switch to a belief that such early creatures were actually apelike men.

EARTH'S magnetic field has shown virtually no change in the past hundred million years, states a three-man team employed in studying it for the Carnegie Institute of Washington, D. C. The team bases its statement on study of sedimentary rock cut from levels which place it as surface sediment far back before the age of Man.

RED supergiant stars, once numerous in our star system, are now practically extinct, according to Dr. A. E. Whitford of the University of Wisconsin. Antares and Betelgeuse are two of the few of these spendthrift titans remaining in our own galaxy.

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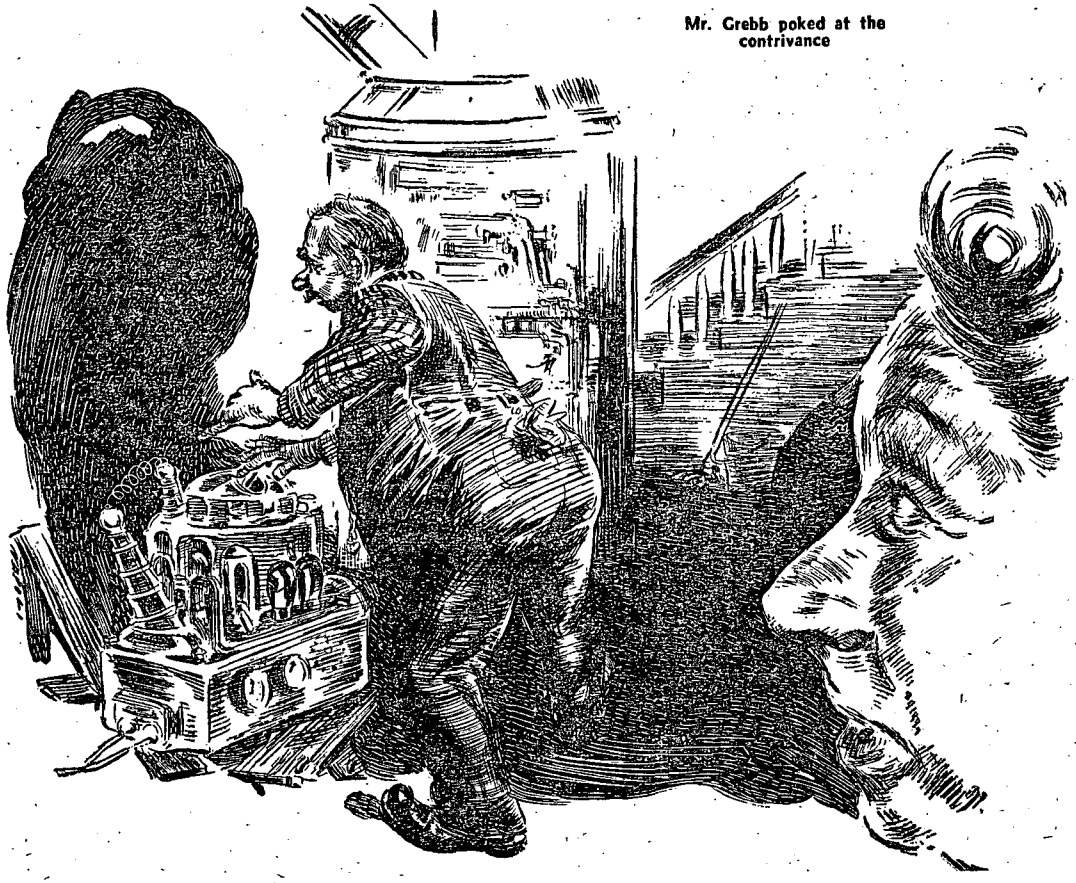

Mr. Grebb poked at the contrivance

The Life-Work of PROFESSOR MUNTZ

By MURRAY LEINSTER

NOBODY would ordinarily have thought of Mr. Grebb and Professor Muntz in the same breath, so to speak, yet their careers impinged upon each other remarkably. Mr. Grebb was a large, coarse person, with large coarse manners and large coarse pores on an oversized nose. He drove a beer truck for the Ajax Brewing Company, and his one dominant desire was to get something on Joe Hallix, who as head of the delivery service for Ajax, was his immediate boss.

Professor Muntz, on the other hand, was the passionately shy and mouselike author of "The Mathematics of Multiple Time-Tracks," who vanished precipitately when he found himself famous. In that abstruse work he referred worriedly to experimental evidence of parallel time-tracks, and other physicists converged upon him with hopeful gleams

Multiple Time-Tracks Lead to the Ajax Brewery!

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in their eyes, and he fled.

Professor Muntz couldn't talk to people. But they wanted to know about his experiments. They couldn't make any. They didn't know how to start, and to them the whole thing had been abstract theory. But he had made experiments and they wanted to ask about them, so he ran away in an agony of shyness.

That was that. No one human being could seem less likely to be affected by Professor Muntz' life-work than Mr. Grebb, and no life-work could seem more certainly immune to Mr. Grebb than Professor Muntz'. But life is full of paradoxes, and the theory of multiple time-cracks is even fuller. Therefore. . .

Mr. Grebb waked when his alarm clock rang stridently beside his ear. His eyes still closed, he numbly reached out a large, hairy ham of a hand and threw the alarm clock fiercely across the room. But it was a very tough alarm clock. It continued to ring in a far corner, battered and bruised, its glass long gone, and dented so that it had a rakish and completely disreputable appearance. But it rang defiantly. It rang stridently. It rang naggingly. Its tone seemed to have something of the quality of a Bronx cheer.

Its tumult penetrated to the sleep drugged recesses of what Mr. Grebb considered his brain. It reminded him of the hour. Of the bright and merry sunshine. It was a clarion call to duty and the service of the Ajax Brewing Company. And in that context it was a reminder of the existence of Joe Hallix, and it was a raspberry.

MR. GREBB opend one vaguely bloodshot eye. Rage appeared in it. The other eye opened. Fury developed. He swore heavily at the name and thought of Joe Hallix, who would have him docked if he were late. The alarm clock rang on, jeering.

Mr. Grebb got out of bed, rumbling bitterly, and put on his clothes. He slept in his underwear, so he had merely to pull on his pants, slide into a brightly-checked flannel shirt, and pull on his shoes. He went down to breakfast, glowering.

His landlady discreetly served him coffee without even a good-morning. She presented a huge stack of pancakes and vast quantities of sausage. He ate, largely and coarsely. He finished up the pancakes with thick molasses, wiping up his plate. He drank more coffee. A certain gloomy peace descended upon him.

"Mr. Grebb—" said his landlady hopefully.

He scowled, then remembered that his board was paid. He relaxed and fumbled out a cigarette which looked very small in his hairy fingers. "Yeah?"

"I wondered if I could ask your advice," his landlady went on. "I don't know anything about machinery, Mr. Grebb, and I thought you'd know all about it, being you drive a truck."

Mr. Grebb was pleased at the tribute.

"The lodger who had your room, Mr. Grebb," said the landlady, "was a very nice little man. But one day he dodged a truck and jumped in front of a bus, and they took him to the hospital and he died there. And the police came and took his things to pay the hospital bill and to try to find his family. I don't know if they did. And I was so flustered about him getting killed like that that I forget about him owing me a week's board, and I didn't think about the box until I went down in the cellar yesterday and noticed it."

Mr. Grebb's hand caressed his stomach. He loosened his belt a trifle.

"Yeah?" he said encouragingly.

"He had a box he asked to have put down in the cellar, and I forgot to tell the police about it. But he did owe me a week's board. So yesterday when I noticed the box I peeked in between the slats, and it's a sort of machine. So I thought I'd get you to look at it. If it's valuable I'll tell the police and they can sell it and maybe pay me what he owed me."

"Huh!" said Mr. Grebb. "Them cops! Grafters, all of 'em! You keep the thing. Use it. What's the difference?"

"I don't know what it's for," said the landlady. "Would you look at it, Mr. Grebb?"

"Sure!" said Mr. Grebb amiably. "If it's valuable I guess I know a place to sell it."

As a matter of fact, he did not. But he figured that somewhere among his acquaintances he could find somebody who would know how to sell almost anything with no questions asked, and he estimated that his landlady would take his word for what he sold it for. Which should mean a quick buck or two. The thought was cheering.

"I got a coupla minutes," he said generously. "I'll look now.

He followed his landlady down the rickety cellar stairs. He saw the crate. He did not

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bother to read the express tag on it, or he would have seen that it was addressed to Professor Aldous Muntz at this street and number. He wouldn't have thought of "The Mathematics of Multiple Time-Tracks" at that, though. He knew nothing of abstruse speculations on the nature of space and time and reality. But the landlady turned on a drop-light and he poked at the paper wrapping inside the crate.

There were many wires. There were two or three radio tubes. There were transformer coils, and there was a row of dials marked, Milliamperes, Kilovolts, and so on.

He pulled away the crating boards. He saw that it was not a factory-made contrivance. It was not enclosed in a mass-production case. All the works were in plain view, though some were swathed in protective coverings. To Mr. Grebb it looked vaguely like a home-made radio. He was disappointed.

The doorbell rang upstairs. The landlady said: "I'd better answer the bell. You just look it over, Mr. Grebb."

SHE went up. Mr. Grebb shook his head sadly. It was not something that could be sold at a standard hot-goods price, with a profit for himself. But he saw an extension cord with a bayonet plug at the end. He pulled it out and plugged it into the outlet of the dangling cellar light.

Nothing happened. There was a row of switches. He poked one or two, experimentally. Still nothing happened. He did not hear music or even an enthusiastic voice telling of the marvelous new product, Reeko, a refined deodorant and double your money back if your best friends can smell you. The machine remained inert and useless. He did not notice that a tiny dial went over to "20" on the milliampere scale and to "19.6" on the kilovolt dial.

He turned and lumbered upstairs, disgusted. Not a chance for a sudden buck. Which was just his kind of luck, he thought. Like having Joe Hallix for a boss.

"I ain't got time to look it over good," he told his landlady. "I'll see about it later."

He put on his hat and windbreaker and went out the front door. He saw the morning paper on the porch. He picked it up and stuffed it in his pocket. It belonged to his landlady, but she had not seen him take it. It would be convenient to read on the bus. He had to run to get to the corner on time. He thought of Hallix who would raise the devil if he were late to work. He breathed heavily in his indignation at the existence of people like Joe Hallix who would get him fired if he had half a chance. Presently he got out the newspaper.

He read, quite unsuspicious. The newspaper, had he known it, was unique. It was quite the most remarkable newspaper on the whole world. It was the direct result of a milliammeter reading of twenty and a kilovolt reading of nineteen-point-six on the device down in the cellar of his landlady's home.

This newspaper said that "Undertaker Joe" had beaten "Goatface Jim" at the wrestling matches last night. It said that the Rangers had won, 6-3, in last night's night game. It said that Carribee had romped home first in the fourth race, paying seven for two. Mr. Grebb was pained. He stuffed the paper in the crack of the seat beside him. He fell into bitter meditation on the undesirable characteristics of Joe Hallix.

In time, he got off the bus, the bus-conductor gathered up the paper with other trash and heaved it into the trash box at the end of the line, and it was lost forever. Which was regrettable, because all other copies of the morning paper said that Goatface Jim had won over Undertaker Joe, that the Pilots beat the Rangers 5-3, and that Mooncalf won in the fourth race, paying three for two. The foreign news was different, too, the political news was subtly unlike, and the financial news was peculiar. But Mr. Grebb did not notice.

That day he drove his truck, and got into three arguments with customers, two with Joe Hallix, and almost had a fight with a friend who insisted that Goatface Jim had won the wrestling match. Mr. Grebb was furious when his friend's newspaper checked. It was apparently the same edition of the same paper he'd read, but it didn't say the same things. He considered that it had betrayed him.

Actually, the paper was the result of Professor Muntz' apparatus for experiment in multiple time-tracks. But Mr. Grebb had never heard of Professor Muntz except as a lodger who'd dodged a truck and jumped in front of a bus. He certainly had never heard of multiple time-tracks and surely could not have imagined experiments in that field.

But very many eminent scientists would have given much to read that newspaper, and the contrivance in the cellar could have

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been sold to any of half a dozen research institutions for tens of thousands of dollars. But Mr. Grebb didn't even guess at such a thing, and he went to bed that night in a very gloomy mood.

Next morning the alarm clock jerked him awake and he went downstairs filled with bitterness at the fate which made him get up and gave him Joe Hallix as a boss. His landlady dared not address him even after he was fed.

He stamped dourly out the front door. There was the morning paper. He stooped to pick it up. As he bent over, there was the thump of a rolled-up paper landing. Then there were two papers on the porch. Mr. Grebb jumped, and turned scowling to glare at the paper-boy who apparently had almost hit him. But there was no paper-boy in sight. The paper seemed to have materialized out of empty air. Mr. Grebb growled anathemas at fool boys who hid, and went to his bus.

TODAY'S paper did not deceive him. Today, his oracular comments on sporting events went unchallenged. But he had a furious argument with Joe Hallix. The delivery boss was riding him. Mr. Grebb fumed and muttered all day. When he got home, his landlady said uneasily:

"Mr. Grebb, did you see the paper?"

He growled inarticulately.

"There's a piece in it about Mr. Muntz," said the landlady. "You know, the lodger who had your room and was hit by a bus? They call him Professor Muntz and say he lives here! But the policemen told me that he died in the hospital. I don't know what to think!"

Mr. Grebb remembered vaguely a newspaper which had told him lies. Yesterday's paper. It had appeared out of thin air and it did not tell the truth. Today, the paper that appeared from nowhere had been left behind. But he had no theory. He merely growled:

"Don't believe them newspapers. They print a lot of hooey!"

From his experience of the day before, the remark was justified. But he did not think of the machine in the cellar. Which was a pity, because Mr. Grebb and his landlady too would have been clasped to the bosom of anybody who understood "The Mathematics of Multiple Time-Tracks" and found out about that machine or the newspapers either.

The theory of multiple time-tracks is, in effect, that since there are a great number of really possible futures, that there are a great number of possibly real presents. If a dozen futures are equally possible, they are equally real, and there is no reason to assume that all of them but one cease to have any validity merely because we experience that one as the present.

The theory says that there is no evidence that the present moment of our experience is the only present moment that exists. That reality may be multiple, and that if you toss a coin for a decision, resolving that if it comes heads you will propose to Mabel and to Helen if it comes tails, there exist two futures in which each event can happen, and possibly after the tossing there exist two present moments in which each event does.

And thus it followed that if Professor Muntz jumped out of the way of a truck, immediately before him there was one future in which he was hit by a bus, and another in which he was not. So that a person who understood Professor Muntz' work, and knew about the machine down in the cellar, would immediately have concluded that the newspaper came from a time-track in which Professor Muntz' attempt to dodge the truck had been wholly successful.

But Mr. Grebb did not even speculate about such things. Instead, at supper he described at length and bitterly just what part of a horse's anatomy most resembled Joe Hallix. He explained in great detail just how Joe Hallix had gotten all the delivery slips mixed up so that he, Mr. Grebb, had almost been charged with the loss of four kegs of beer. And afterward he went out to a tavern and had half a dozen beers and grew more embittered as he thought upon his wrongs.

Next morning was cloudy when he went out the front door. There was one paper on the porch. There was a large wet space in the small front yard, and part of the porch was soaking wet. Mr. Grebb picked up the paper, dourly wondering who the devil had been using a hose when it looked like rain anyhow. Then there was a plopping sound, and a second paper appeared out of nowhere and smacked close by Mr. Grebb. He looked indignantly for the boy. He was invisible. There was no boy. The newspaper had come from nowhere.

Mr. Grebb picked it up, too, and went belligerently out to the street to find the paper boy and tell him to stop playing tricks.

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Mr. Grebb's brain was not analytical. When something happened which he did not understand, he assumed aggrievedly that somebody was acting smart. He rumbled wrathfully at his failure to find anybody, and went heavily off to the bus.

On the bus he unfolded one newspaper. He glanced at the headlines and was bored. He shoved it down beside him and seethed over the remembrance of the four kegs of beer he had been accused of mislaying the previous day.

Presently he unfolded the second paper, forgetting the first. The headlines were not the same. He blinked, remembered, and retrieved the first paper. The mastheads were identical. The date was identical. A minor story was identical. But where the headlines differed, they contradicted each other. One said that the local front-page criminal trial had ended in acquittal for the lady who murdered her husband with a boy-scout axe. The other said that she had been convicted and would appeal.

IT DID not occur to Mr. Grebb that the jurymen might have been tossing coins, and that the two papers were the results, respectively, of a coin coming heads and the same coin coming tails. He regarded the two papers with enormous indignation. He checked the inner pages. Again they differed and contradicted each other. Some few items were the same, and the advertisements seemed to match, but the two copies of the same newspaper for the same date treated the same events as if they had happened on different worlds.

Which they had. In different time-tracks, at any rate. One newspaper outlined the events in a world in which metaphorically all coins tossed heads, and the other a world in which tails invariably turned up. The scores of the ball games were different. The racing results—for the same races—were different.

Mr. Grebb furiously tore both papers to shreds and rumbled to himself of the perfidy of newspapers in general and this sheet in particular.

But he had no time to meditate upon it that day. The matter of the four kegs of beer came up again. Mr. Grebb was requested to explain. Purple with fury, he bellowed. Joe Hallix was not the questioner, today. Somebody from the bookkeeping department of the Ajax Brewing Company asked involved and insulting questions.

Mr. Grebb roared defiance. He ran his truck his way! Them delivery slips were crazy, anyhow. Customers weren't complaining, were they? They got what they ordered and what was put on his truck, didn't they? If Joe Hallix got things all messed up, it wasn't his fault! He took the beer where he was told to take it! Them four kegs. . . .

He steamed to himself as he drove out of the brewery with a fresh load. He'd pinned that bookkeeper guy's ears back, all right! Thought he was smart, huh? Said he was going to check back on earlier deliveries. The devil with him! Let him check all he wanted!

But Mr. Grebb was privately worried. As he swore to himself, he drove his truck with greater insolence and abandon even than usual. And he fretted. Because the system of delivery slips was complicated. He had never fathomed all its intricacies. He had devised, instead, a system of magnificent simplicity for his own guidance, which magnificently ignored the piddling details of paper-work. He delivered the beer. But he was belligerently uneasy.

When he returned to his boarding-house he was loudly and fulsomely enraged. The bookkeeper guy had been at him again. Not only the four kegs from yesterday were now in question. Two from the day before and one from the day before that and three from another day earlier still.

The bookkeeper talked with asperity. Threateningly. He hadn't any proof yet, he said, but it looked very queer. There was a lot of beer missing. Mr. Grebb, said the bookkeeper, had messed up his delivery slips so thoroughly that it was not possible yet to guess how much beer had gone astray. Maybe only sixty or seventy kegs, but it might have been going on for months. . . .

Mr. Grebb went to his favorite tavern that night and literally bellowed his opinion of Joe Hallix to the world. Joe Hallix had done this to him! Joe Hallix had mixed up his delivery slips just to get him in trouble. Joe Hallix was a man of minute character indeed, to hear Mr. Grebb tell it.

Meanwhile, down in the cellar of his landlady's house, a device of coils and wires and radio tubes reposed inert and forgotten. But a needle on one tiny dial pointed to twenty milliamperes, and another dial registered nineteen-point-six kilovolts.

And in a certain area in a certain direction from that device there were strictly local

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rain-showers in a space no more than twenty feet across. Sometimes the rain fell there when it wasn't raining anywhere else. It was exactly as if that small twenty-foot circle were somewhere connected with another weather process—or a time-track—so that it received rain quite independently of the ground about it.

Naturally, nobody noticed it. It was night and everything was rain-wet to begin with, and nobody would have understood, anyhow.

A COUPLE of hundred miles away, however, there were people who would have understood it, if they'd known. There had been much learned discussion of "The Mathematics of Multiple Time-Tracks," and as Mr. Grebb bellowed his fury in a tavern around the corner from his boarding house, an eminent mathematician was making an address to a scientific society.

"Professor Muntz has disappeared," he announced regretfully, "and his disappearance is clearly the result of his excessive shyness. However, the references to experimental evidence in his work have borne fruit. He speaks of interdimensional stresses leading to a tendency of disparate time-streams to coalesce. Then he observes that experimental evidence throws some of his equations into question. A careful study of his equations his disclosed a trivial error in assumption which when corrected modifies his equations into accord with the experimental results he mentions.

"There can be no doubt that he has achieved experimental proof of the reality of time-streams, of whole systems of reality, which are parallel to but separate from the reality we know. And what does that mean? It means that if we miss a train in this reality, somewhere there is a cosmos in which we catch it. A thief who has been undetected in the universe we know, has somewhere made some slip which has led to his discovery."

The learned scientist went on and on with his speech, two hundred miles from where Mr. Grebb bellowed to his tavern companions of the iniquity of Joe Hallix.

Next morning, Mr. Grebb was bleary-eyed and morose. He almost lacked appetite. He ate only twelve pancakes and almost forced himself to mop up the plate. He was uneasy. If sixty or seventy kegs of beer were missing, due to his fine scorn of bookkeeping details, he was in a bad fix. If that bookkeeper guy hunted back for six months or so and found even more missing—well, that would make it right serious. Mr. Grebb was ready to weep with vexation and terror of jail.

But he went out of the front door. Keeping gallantly to established custom even in this time of stress, he stooped for the newspaper his landlady paid for and sadly complained she never received. As he bent over, there was a loud slapping noise. A rolled-up newspaper hit him a resounding whack in the seat of the pants.

He roared, grabbed it, and plunged for the street to avenge the indignity. But there was no paper-boy anywhere about. The paper had materialized in mid-air above a twenty-foot circle which yesterday had received rain independently of neighboring territory.

Mr. Grebb was formidable as he marched at last toward his bus. He was large and coarse and infuriated. He rode on the bus, scowling. A fat woman stood beside his seat. She glared at him because he did not offer his place to a fat lady. He unfolded a newspaper to intercept the glare. A minor headline caught his eye:

AJAX BREWERY VICTIMIZED.

Underneath was a news-item. More than four hundred kegs of beer had cleverly been diverted from the regular channels of trade during the past six months. Unscrupulous customers had bought them at cut rates from a dishonest employee.

Irregularities had been suspected, and on the previous day a bookkeeper, checking up, had quite accidentally looked in a drawer containing office-supplies in the delivery director's desk. He found there, casually hidden, forged delivery slips used to cover past diversions, and other delivery slips made ready for use in future thefts. Confronted with the evidence, Joe Hallix had confessed to a six-months' career in the racket and had been placed under arrest.

Mr. Grebb stared blankly. The item was infinitely plausible, but it simply was not true. That had not happened yesterday. When he left the brewery the bookkeeper was still frankly suspicious of him.

Then, suddenly, Mr. Grebb's mouth dropped open. His mental processes were never clear, so he did not reason. But the newspaper story was exactly what he would like to believe, and therefore he was convinced instantly that this was exactly what Joe Hallix had been doing.

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HE BECAME filled with a bellicose triumph. The newspaper slipped from his hands and fell to the floor of the bus, to be trampled on and soiled and so ultimately to go unglanced-at into a trash box. But Mr. Grebb steamed. So that was what Joe Hallix was doing! And he was blaming the missing beer on an innocent truck-driver of utter integrity—on Mr. Grebb himself!

He stalked into the warehouse with magnificent dignity, to find himself confronted by Joe Hallix, by the bookkeeper, and by two other men of ominous aspect.

"Look here, Grebb!" said the bookkeeper sternly. "I worked all night on this thing! There's four hundred kegs of beer missing in the past six months! Every record is straight but yours? Your delivery slips are a mess! What've you been putting over?"

Mr. Grebb breathed heavily.

"Me," said Mr. Grebb dramatically, "I been thinkin'! Thinkin' about why my records always get jammed up an' why Joe Hallix always keeps pickin' on me an' ripenin' me up for a fall guy for him! Any of the other drivers will tell you I'm a right guy, an' any one of 'em will tell you he's a crook!"

The bookkeeper interrupted impatiently, but Mr. Grebb bellowed him down.

"Look in his desk!" he roared in righteous wrath. "Look where he keeps his blank forms! You'll find the whole works right there! Right in this here drawer!"

He thumped with a hairy ham of a hand, breathing in snorts of indignation.

Joe Hallix tried to laugh scornfully. But it wasn't good. That Mr. Grebb, of all humans, should have hit so instantly and with such uncanny accuracy upon the hiding-place of papers he had to have handy for the working of his racket, and which nobody in the world should ever have thought of looking for, was simply beyond belief. It was too sudden and too startling and too starkly impossible.

Joe Hallix tried to laugh it off, but sweat poured out on his forehead. When the bookkeeper, after one look at his graying face, stooped to pull out the drawer, Joe Hallix got panicky. And the two ominous gentlemen turned their attention to him. . . .

Mr. Grebb returned to his boarding house in a mood of triumphant indignation. He was as near to perfect happiness as he would ever get. Joe Hallix was unmasked and headed for jail, and he, Mr. Grebb, was proven innocent as a babe unborn. Moreover, that half-keg of beer he had managed to get away with, two months before, would never be charged against him.

He was magnificent in his sensations of vindicated purity. He told his landlady about it at supper. But he did not mention the newspaper. He did not understand that, and therefore he ignored it. She listened admiringly.

"I always knew you were smart, Mr. Grebb," she said with conviction. "That's why I asked you about that machine down in the basement. Did you ever get time to look at it again, Mr. Grebb?"

"It's no good," said Mr. Grebb largely. "It's just some stuff put together crazy. It don't work."

"Too bad," said the landlady. "And I've let it clutter up my cellar all this time."

"I'll get it out for you," said Mr. Grebb, generously. "Give it a couple kicks to get it in two pieces so I can handle it easy, an' I'll pile it out on the sidewalk for the garbage man to haul away."

Which, out of the kindness of his heart, he did. It is still a mystery in high scientific circles just what Professor Muntz did with himself, and what sort of experimental apparatus he had to back his work in "The Mathematics of Multiple Time-Tracks." Some eminent scientists still hope he will turn up eventually, in spite of his passionate shyness. It is not likely, because he jumped out of the way of a truck and landed in front of a bus. In this time-track, at any rate. Perhaps in another, different conditions prevail. But life and the theory of multiple time-tracks are full of paradoxes.

In this time-track the paradox was that nobody would ordinarily think of Mr. Grebb and Professor Muntz in the same breath, so to speak, yet their careers most curiously impinged upon each other. Mr. Grebb was driving the truck that Professor Muntz dodged when he jumped in front of the bus, and Mr. Grebb moved into the lodging Professor Muntz vacated, and Mr. Grebb kicked to pieces the device which was the Professor's life-work, and set the fragments out on the sidewalk for the garbage-man.

But Professor Muntz had his effect on Mr. Grebb, too. It was his device that brought those newspapers from another time-track and enabled Mr. Grebb to unmask the fine villainy of Joe Hallix. It is due to Professor Muntz' life-work in fact—it is its fine fruit—that Mr. Grebb still drives a truck for the Ajax Brewing Company.

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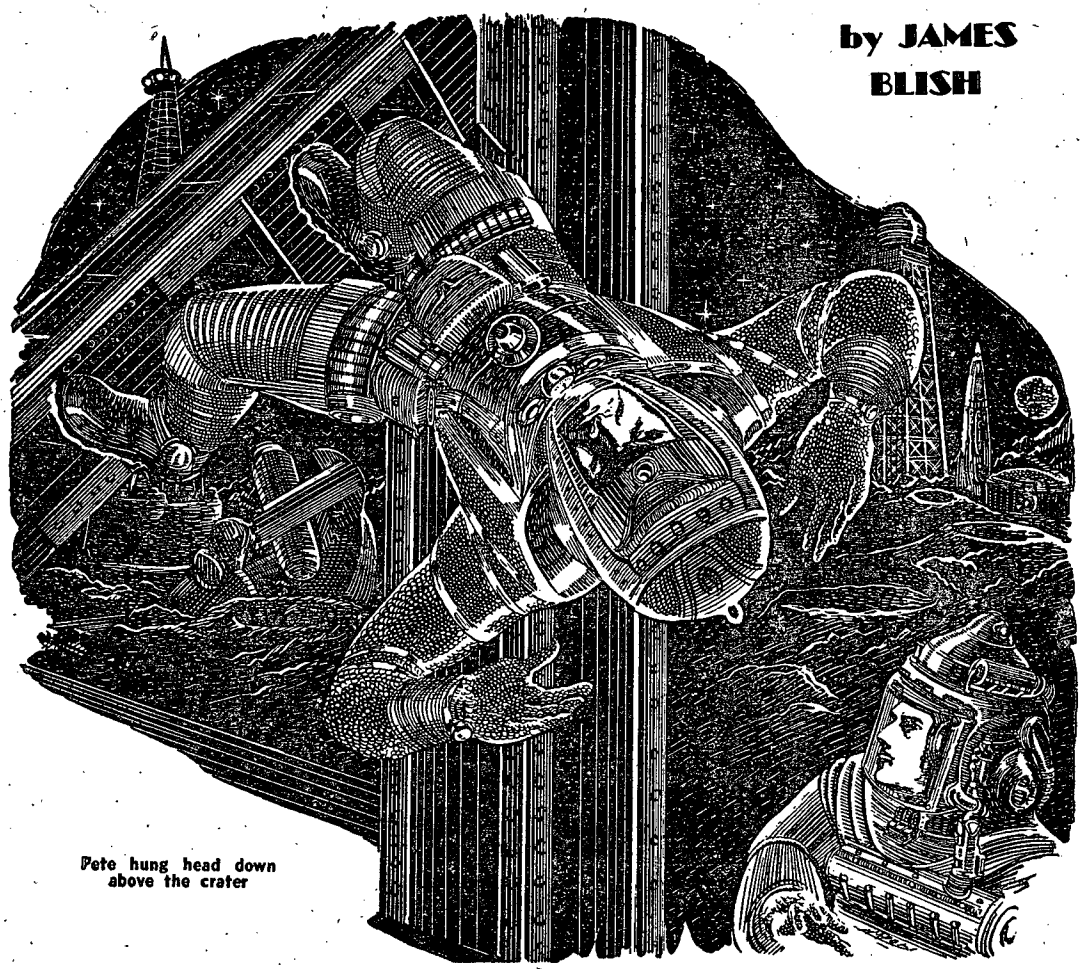
The Homesteader

by JAMES BLISH



Pete hung head down above the crater

When moon-based rockets vanish without trace, Pete Kagen proves it's all done with mirrors!

PETE KAGEN arrived on the moon in an Army rocket, a foul mood, and an Unofficial Capacity. His job as trouble-shooter for the Field Service of the Subcommittee for Enabling, Facilitating and Channelizing of the Senate Technical and Scientific Committee had taken him to a large number of godforsaken places, but this one bid fair to be the worst.

Pete's trouble, in the last analysis, probably was rooted in the fact that he was not a science-fiction addict. The romance of space, as far as he was concerned, was about as exciting as a dentist appointment and planets other than the Earth less appetizing than last Friday's, fish cakes. He was a superb technician and a man who knew the insides of an astonishing number of sciences, but he had no imagination.

"There's no sense in it," he groused to the

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rocket's pilot. "There's not another planet in this whole system that's livable except at terrific expense, and just no damn reason to spend the money. There's not even any military reason—a base on the moon is nothing but an expensive assemblage of strategical disadvantages."

"Hear, hear," said the pilot, who was a major. "We've got a base, all the same. Even a citizenry, if one civilian counts."

"Just because the Army is grabby. They love to own land. Even if it isn't any good. What are they doing, I ask you? Just trying to figure out ways to get to Mars, where they can acquire more useless property at terrific expense. Is there anything valuable out here, I ask you? No. There's nothing in the solar system valuable enough to pay the expenses of getting to it. Nothing."

"You have no imagination, Dr. Kagen."

"People keep saying that to me," Pete complained. "Just because I try to save the taxpayers' money. Look where it's gotten me."

HE REGARDED the approaching, crater-pitted landscape with more than a little disfavor.

"Anyhow," he said, "The Congress of the United States wants to know what there is up here that's costing so much money. And it had better be good."

"We're losing ships," the pilot said.

"I know that. But you're losing all of them, and that wasn't counted on; the figures on your probable losses were estimated at several million bucks less than the present output. The Congress of the United States thinks maybe some Colonel has his hand jammed in the till, and if the Congress is right, you can whistle for your next appropriation."

The pilot shrugged. "You can't get to Mars on your hands and knees," he said. "There are plenty of risks. Some of them have to be unexpected ones."

"Some of them," Pete said.

Probably the pilot had been a little ruffled by the dim view Pete had taken of the Army's motives, the romance of space, and the possibility of a new appropriation. His landing was rough even by lunar standards—which did nothing to raise Pete's estimate of the amount of romance to be found per cubic mile of space.

Nevertheless, he could find nothing seriously amiss at the base, except for the one, unhappy fact that the big ships never came back. There were minor irregularities here and there—the Post Exchange, for instance, was profiting sinfully on the sale of soap—but Pete seldom reported such things, considering that a man who is marooned has a right to exercise a little free enterprise now and then.

What interested him most was that his tour of the base did not turn up one single clue which might show why the big ships never came back. The Army was as puzzled by the systematic losses as he was. There was no scandal here; no bookkeeping tricks hid paper flights where no ship had flown; the ships had been lost—and thirty men with them on every flight.

Pete's permanent frown was graven even deeper when he came out of the base commandant's office. The Colonel—evidently no Generals were yet willing to risk their necks at Project Moonstruck—followed him to the big window of the tower.

"Damn funny," Pete muttered. He looked out over the camp to the distant crater wall. It ringed the base, but from here it looked like the discarded underjaw of a dinosaur. One of the sharper teeth seemed to he having some dental work done; Pete pointed to the crazy zigzagging bridgework that crowned it.

"What's that, Colonel?"

"That's Richardson Observatory—or rather, their solar observatory. They're still building it. The big telescope is out yonder a ways, plunk in the middle of the Mare Serenitatis."

"I see," Pete said. "Odd-looking structure; no shielding."

"Why would they need shielding?" the Colonel said, smiling. "It hasn't rained since *I've* been here."

"I'm not a boob," Pete said sharply. "I was thinking of meteorites."

The Colonel pointed aloft at the eerie green globe of Earth. "That's a mighty big broom," he said. "Broom and dustbin all in one. Any meteor that's big enough and fast enough to make it to the Moon would blot out the whole camp. All that buckshot that zips around the atmosphere as you come out never gets here."

"Earth diverts all the small stuff, eh?"

"Right." said the Colonel. "Funny thing: most of the meteors we see here are traveling horizontally to our surface. Curving toward the Earth, you see. Every so often one hits, but the chances really aren't much greater

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than they would be on Earth. About two and a half times as great, to be specific."

"I want to go over to the observatory."

"Waste of time. Their men have all been cleared by the Un-Earthly Activities Committee. Never pay any attention to us."

"I'm going over," Pete said.

As the Colonel shrugged, a brilliant glare cascaded over his forehead, his cheekbones, and the tip of his nose, and spotlighted his silver eagles in dazzling relief. Pete's head jerked back.

There was a second sun in the sky. It was a little smaller than the proper sun, but it was just as bright. It lasted a little more than four seconds, and then expanded to a ghost and vanished. Livid images swam on Pete's retina.

"That—"

"—is why you're here," the Colonel said. His mouth was bitter with fury. "That was another thirty men, and another million bucks of rocketship. Pretty, eh? Too bad the boys who sent you couldn't have seen it."

For once, Pete did not lose his temper. The Colonel was right. Seeing the real thing was quite unlike sitting in the Senate Office Building and thinking in terms of appropriations.

Thirty men and a ship—and a sun where no sun should be.

FROM the pinnacle at the crater's edge, the Army base was tiny, a set of marbles huddled in a huge ring. Scintillations came from it, and a palely-lighted area about as big as a matchbox showed where the launching field was.

"Their lights don't bother us up here, you see," the astronomer was saying. "Of course, we hadn't counted on these periodic nuclear explosions in the sky, but those can't last long now."

"I hope that doesn't turn out to be just flattery, Dr. Latham." Pete threaded his way across the girders which were, as yet, all the flooring the solar observatory had, hoping to look down the other side of the crater ridge onto the vast plain of the Mare Serenitatis.

The fact that he was in a spacesuit made every step a juggling trick. Moving in a spacesuit under the best of conditions is a tricky business, first tipping onesself forward until the weight of the equipment makes one begin to fall, and then taking a quick, elephantine step to regain balance. On a smooth, obstructionless surface it is possible to be slightly out of balance all the time, so that considerable speed can be built up by a continually-arrested falling-forward—a brewery-horse version of normal walking.

But Pete, new to suits, didn't dare risk it, especially on an open lattice. Instead, he had the magnets in his shoes on full, and was sliding himself cautiously along the chrome steel ribs like a hippo learning to skate.

About half-way across, he found himself rising in stately fashion toward the scaffolding on the far side. "Look out!" his helmet radio shouted uselessly. Pete continued to rise, turning gently. He had a vivid picture of himself passing through the wide-spaced scaffolding and tumbling down the side of the crater toward the Sea of Serenity. It was not a pretty picture.

He was almost exactly upside down in mid-air, floating toward the Sea, when something took him a terrific blow just below the belt line. He hung, head down. Then his shoes detected steel two inches above their straining soles and dragged him up, glueing themselves against the crossbar. Metal squealed on metal, and the thing that had stopped him in the first place pressed confidingly into the small of his back.

He found himself looking down into the face of Dr. Latham, who was looking up at him interestedly through the fishbowl of his own helmet.

"Why did you turn off your magnets?" Latham said.

"I didn't," said Pete, pointing to where his shoes were sticking to the crossbar. "They just quit on me for a second. What do I do now?"

Latham frowned. "Very odd. Well, there'd be no harm in your turning the magnets off now. You've only got about twelve feet to fall, and I can catch you easily enough against this gravity."

Pete flicked the switch and descended, his inverted head full of interesting curses to be applied to his bosses when he got home. Latham caught him by the waist and turned him upright like a milk bottle.

"Now what the hell? I'd swear that I didn't touch that switch. One minute I was skidding myself along the girders, and then there I was bound for nowhere. Any non-magnetic patches in your construction here?"

"No, I'm sure there aren't," Latham said. "You'd better have your suit inspected when you get back."

Pete would inspect it, but he was pretty

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sure he'd find nothing amiss. He tabulated the odd accident in the bottomless filing-case of his memory. Little incidents of this kind, he had found long ago, had a way of turning into valuable clues once they were understood completely.

Anyhow, there was nothing at the nascent solar observatory that could make million-dollar ships blow up in mid-space; and as Col. Beach had said, everybody on the project had been passed after a very thorough investigation. That left the observatory proper, where there were more men and hence a slightly better chance for infiltration by saboteurs. That is, the chances were better mathematically; actually, Pete was certain, everybody on that project was as loyal as could be managed without actual possession of red, white and blue blood corpuscles.

KAGEN momentarily forgot about his helmet and tried to scratch a violent itch on the tip of his nose. He was unsuccessful.

"By the way," he said, shrugging resignedly. "While I was going tail over teacup toward nowhere, I saw a light down on the plain. That couldn't be the observatory, not this close to the crater and with only one light going. What is it?" He peered cautiously down the mountainside, then pointed. "There; over that way."

"Oh, he's an old story," Dr. Latham said. "That's Dr. Brighton, our homesteader."

"Your *what*?"

"Homesteader. He lives there. He has some sort of incurable disease, I understand, but he's an interesting fellow."

"How is he interesting?" Pete said suspiciously. "I didn't know that any of the moon had been declared public land. Doesn't the Army object to having a civilian this close to its stamping grounds?"

"No, indeed," Latham said. "They're understaffed at the hospital, you know, and Brighton frequently helps them out. Quite a sense of humor; he's put a weathercock on his house. Why don't you go and visit him? I'm sure he'd welcome the company."

"I wonder," Pete said. He made sure he hadn't lost his automatic and started with determination down the outside of the crater.

Pete's suit radio said, "This is Dr. Brighton. Are you coming to see me?"

"You bet," Pete said. Brighton's "house" was still about a mile distant, but the absence of air and the smoothness of the ground all the way to the horizon made it stand out clearly against the blackness. There was an inexplicable triangle of some dark substance on the tumbled pumice before it.

"Very good," the doctor's voice said. "One warning, though, don't trample on my crops. They're dangerous."

"Crops?"

"You can see the dark fan from where you are, I think," Brighton said. "That's my loam, and I grow things in it, as the law requires. Most of them are dangerous, so you'd best not step on it; go around the fan."

"Okay," Pete said.

As he got closer, he could see the weathercock Latham had mentioned. It was canted at a crazy angle, as if an impossible hurricane had bent its supporting rod. Somehow it didn't seem like a very good joke to Pete, but then he couldn't summon the necessary detachment of attitude toward anything lunar.

The dark fan really was loam. If there was anything growing in it, it must have been destined for the breakfast table of the Invisible Man. Pete, however, skirted the fan-shaped plot dutifully, noting with interest that the small end of the fan stopped just short of Dr. Brighton's airlock. The house was domed and featureless except for the weathercock, and the overlapping plates of a solar radiator near the ground at the back. Pete stationed himself in the clear area just in front of the airlock, and with a disgusted expression rapped the antique brass knocker. He hated whimsical people.

"Better stand back when the port opens," the doctor's voice said. "I use the lock for a dust-bin."

The port lifted from the bottom. There was a *whoosh* and a cloud of what seemed to be pocket-flug flew out with the blast of air. The fan-shaped "loam" was explained.

"Periodically I dispose of waste on the field," Brighton said cheerily. "It makes an excellent soil. Come in, Dr. Kagen."

The moment the inner port opened, Pete's fish-bowl was completely covered with dew. He took it off, and scratched his nose briskly. The humidity in here was terrific.

Brighton was a short, stocky man, red-haired, with a paper-white face which bore no expression whatsoever. He held out a hand.

"Glad to see you. We get few visitors. When the Colonel told me you were flying in, I rather hoped you'd come and see me."

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"You could have been pretty sure I would," Pete said, struggling out of his suit. "In my business nobody gets any privacy. Latham described you as a homesteader. What gives? Don't tell me you live here by preference, because already I don't believe it." He sat down in a small and uncomfortable chair and eyed Brighton belligerently.

Brighton chuckled. The effect of the sound, coming as it did from a face which did not seem to move a muscle, was eerie. "But I do," he said. "I find it much more congenial than the Earth. You see, I suffer from congenital *myasthenia gravis*—muscular weakness. Earth for me is a very difficult environment. But on the moon, gravity is weaker, and I can move about just as well as a normal person could on Earth."

"I see," Pete said thoughtfully. "But it must have taken you a mint of money to put this place up."

"It did, but I had the money; made it quite honestly in industrial research." Brighton sat down on a small cot opposite Pete, and linked his hands in an odd gesture. "What really made the trouble was the Homestead Act itself. You're familiar with it?"

"Me? Hell, no. I'm just a trouble-shooter."

FOR the first time, Brighton's lips thinned in something resembling a smile, though it did not reach his eyes. "It was written in 1862," he said. "Needless to say, the legislators did not have lunar conditions in mind when they wrote it. First of all I had to present an affidavit that I had personally examined the 160 acres I wanted. I did that through the Hale telescope, and finally got Washington to admit that under the circumstances this constituted 'examination' within the meaning of the Law.

"Then I hit the Taylor Grazing Act, which specifies that the land has to be proved more suitable for agriculture than for any other purpose before a homesteading application can be approved. That stumped me until I thought of claiming that the land wasn't good for *anything* except the kind of agriculture I proposed to practice on it. You see, I already knew that a homesteader is required to cultivate, and had already taken steps to meet that requirement."

"Whoa a minute," Pete said. "All this is fascinating in a horrible sort of a way, but what I want to know is how you maintain yourself. Isn't it fantastically expensive to have supplies shipped up here? Whatever it is you're growing in that bare patch outside, it can't be enough to supply you with oxygen, food, *and* power."

"Power is not worrisome," Brighton said. "I get it from the sun during the day; I have a conventional re-circulating solar engine, and the recirculation keeps the house at exactly the proper temperature, day or night. I get more power than I need that way, and have to radiate some of it—you saw the radiator."

"Yes. And food, and so on?"

"I run the house like a balanced aquarium. You know the principle? Here, let's have a look around." He got up and opened a door at the back.

The door led toward the outside of the house, into a room which seemed to be a combined laboratory and workroom. "This completely encircles my living quarters," Brighton said. "And outside of it, there is another circle, the outermost room—" he opened another door—"where I have the hydroponic tanks. In them I grow vegetables, most of them protein-high ones such as beans; I eat the fruits and the plants themselves keep the air pure. Organic wastes, of course, are used as fertilizer."

"It still seems pretty uncomfortable to me. I don't envy you, Dr. Brighton, but I guess I admire your guts."

"Thank you."

Pete went back into the workroom and went slowly through it, all the way around the house. "You haven't told me what you grow," he said.

"Anerobic bacteria."

"Ah," Pete said. "Of course. Organic wastes—the perfect culture medium; and the sunlight for an incubator; and no need to worry about oxygen or the cold nights. Ingenious."

"Thank you," Dr. Brighton said. "It is really quite a profitable crop. Many of these little plants can be used in various fermentations, enabling me to sell alcohols, acetones and other chemicals to the Army, and even to make a sort of beer for myself and guests; would you care for some?"

"Never drink on the job," Pete said. "I suppose that you make serums and vaccines, too, for the hospital."

"Exactly."

Pete got back to his starting point, scratched his head, and drew his automatic.

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"All right, Brighton," he said. "If that's your name, or if you've got a name. Where'd you hide it?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"The PPI 'scope. The radar set."

"You're out of your mind," Brighton said flatly.

"No, I'm not. I knew you were my man as soon as I got a good look at that so-called weathercock. It's double; there are two wire birds, not just one, and the rod holding it up is in a ball-and-socket joint. Why should it be, unless it's supposed to be moved around? And if the bird is just decorative, why move it around?"

"I didn't build this place with my bare hands," Brighton said angrily. "I'm a bacteriologist, not a construction engineer. Ask the man who designed the house about the joint—I don't know why it's there."

PETE said, "But *I* do. And I was interested to note that your sun-power mirrors were pointing along the same axis as the flat side of the weathercock was. There was an almighty big explosion in that direction not so long ago.

From a little accident that happened to my shoe-magnets a while back, I gather that you've invented, or your compatriots have invented, a degaussing field of some kind. Naturally a cyclotron engine isn't going to take kindly to being demagnetized in full cry."

He shoved the gun forward a little. "By the way, Junior, just what planet *are* you from?"

Brighton stared at him for a moment. Then he shrugged.

"Mars," he said. "How did you guess? My English must be all right, for I've been in America a long time."

"No, it wasn't the English," Pete said. "But when you linked your fingers a while back, you linked them with the *backs* of your hands together, and I noticed that your fingers actually bent that way naturally. That confirmed my guess that you had on some kind of a rubber mask, and made me think your whole body must be a mask." He grinned. "Not your fault, Brighton, an unconscious gesture. Well, I imagine we'll be seeing what you folks *really* look like before long."

"I suppose so," the Martian said dispiritedly. "We did our best to keep you savages in your own jungles. I suppose you'll be poking your nose into Atlan-Kar itself before long."

"Me?" Pete said. "Hell no. Space travel is for heroes. I'm going home and stay there."

* * * * *

The committeeman looked up as Pete came into the office.

"Oh, hello, Dr. Kagen. Job for you."

"Okay," Pete said. "What now?"

"There seems to be some kind of irregularity in the new base at Atlan-Kar—"

From space to the Moon, from the Moon to the Sun, Alar the Thief pursues a strange destiny in search of a self he must find if civilization is to break its shackles—in FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY, a brilliant complete novel by Charles L. Harness in the May issue of

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(Continued from page 7)

human progress can be achieved. Once again we repeat that humanity has Utopia well within its grasp—if the species has but the basic decency to seize it!

OUR NEXT ISSUE

MURRAY LEINSTER steps into the lead spot of the August issue with a singularly pulse-stirring long novelet entitled FURY FROM LILLIPUT. It is, as nearly as we can recall, the first time Mr. Leinster has tackled what is, to many lovers of science fiction, the most fascinating of all imaginative concepts—namely, the idea of sudden variation in size.

It begins when Larry Hart's motor cruiser, the *Bazooka III*, strikes a snag off a small island, shipwrecking him. He makes shore safely, finds there a recently-abandoned bungalow which is in itself a mystery, and a frightening number of hungry cats.

Exploring the bungalow, he steps in front of what looks like a radio-television set and —well, when he picks himself up and becomes orientated in the suddenly strange world that surrounds him he finds himself six inches rather than six feet tall.

The nuisance of the hungry cats has become a deadly peril—the equivalent of a herd of hungry tyrannosauri—and he must even beware of mice and insects if he wishes to survive. His only clue to what might have happened is the name of "Professor Emily Drake", which he found upon a photograph just before disaster struck. Dr. Drake is one of the ablest and best-known scientists of the earth.

But neither she nor anyone else is in evidence—though little by little Hart is able to deduce that he is not the first person to suffer such sudden shrinkage. His predecessors have either succumbed to the predatory life around them or in some way made their escape—which is what Hart decides to do.

From then on he is plunged into a drama whose pseudo-scientific elements are as surprising and suspenseful as its emotional and dramatic factors. He is able to reach another island in a tiny boat, where he joins forces with Professor Drake and her niece, Anne, and with them seeks a way out of the dilemma, into which a predatory scientist, Dr. Bennett, has cast them all.

You'll want to know about the discovery of the match and its strange results, about the unexpected discovery of a beachboy and his dog, about the fire in Dr. Bennett's laboratory—about any and all of the excitements that lie ahead of you in FURY FROM LILLIPUT. This is fine science fiction by a fine practitioner.

Sharing the headline honors of the issue with Leinster is ARTHUR C. CLARKE with THE LION OF COMARRE. Once again, as in his well-remembered AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT (in STARTLING STORIES, November, 1948) he takes us to a distant future, there to participate actively in the unriddling of the problems that face a vastly different humanity.

In this case, Clarke's protagonist is Richard Peyton III, a rebel against the order of his day, in which artists, philosophers, lawgivers and statesmen have usurped human leadership from practical scientists, whose work ostensibly is done.

Only in the mysterious city of Comarre, whose nature and existence have long since become legendary, can young Peyton seek the destiny he knows is his. So, despite the opposition of his father and other great men, he sets forth to find Comarre, dream-city of the mighty Rolf Thordarsen, last of the mighty scientists, who had vanished some five centuries before.

Peyton finds Comarre, thanks to the lion that befriends him, finds Comarre and is baffled by its traps and secrets and almost overcome by its potency. But, again with an assist from the unexpected beast, he at last gets to the roots of the mystery and finds—but that will have to wait until the August issue. Suffice it to say that what he finds is what neither he nor we nor you can expect.

Those who enjoyed THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER will be delighted to hear that third spot in the long stories department goes to A. E. VAN VOGT and PROJECT SPACESHIP. This is a simple story of a simple man—Bob Merritt—and his simple desire to get off the Earth for the first time in known history.

Man and project are simple enough—but the complexities of getting his project into work in a political democracy are endless and disheartening. Though Merritt has the per-

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sistency of a Gandhi he is tempted time and again to give it up—and always the inner strength of his urge toward the planets refuse to give him release.

Also among next issue's headliners—AMPHISKIOS, an amazing novelet by JOHN D MacDONALD, plus short stories by authors who are household names in science fiction circles. Then, too, we'll be back with reviews, the FRYING PAN, and so will you as represented in this letter column.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

BEFORE getting really into the swing of things with the epistolary headaches, here are a couple of briefies that should show you why editors and icepacks have such contiguity. To wit—

Dear Editor: THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER informs me that A. E. van Vogt is indeed a writer of high merit—perhaps some sort of a giant in science fiction. I have read nothing of his work before the February TWS but he has my nod of appreciation for this amazing, almost titanic piece of work—*Rodney Palmer, 226 West 60th Street, Chicago 21, Ill.*

Oh, sweet words. But get a load of this—

Dear Sir: Is van Vogt's story to be explained in some future issue, have you time to explain it to me by private correspondence, or are those of us with an IQ less than the Councilors to be permanently frustrated? Even detective stories usually reach a clear explanation at the end.—*Henry Lemaire, Chemistry Department, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, Cal.*

Answer to the first two queries—no, no! Answer to the third—yes, permanently. Incidentally, what the heck was so tough about that one?

And now for a convention announcement.

OVER THE RHINE IN FORTY-NINE
by Dale Tarr

Dear Sir: Probably the readers of TWS will be interested in knowing that the Seventh World Annual Science Fiction Convention will be held in centrally located Cincinnati over the Labor Day week end, September 3-4-5, 1949.

Everything that can be done will be done in the effort to make this event one well worth the individual fan's attendance. The Cincinnati Fantasy Group, hosts, urge the attendance of TWS's readers and assure them of a hearty welcome.

Further particulars may be obtained by writing Don Ford, 129 Maple Ave., Sharonville, O.

Cincinnati seems like a good location for the meeting. We hereby offer our heartiest support to its promotion. Labor Day may seem a long way off—it isn't. So begin planning now if you think you can make it.

EYES OF TEXAS
by Chad Oliver

Dear Editor: With nary a backward glance at the hideous pile of accumulated work stacked on my groaning desk, I should like, if I may, to make a few gentle corrections, an observation or two, and mayhap bat the breeze a bit as in fond days of yore. Shall we away?

Firstly, to my profound regret, I fear that I must withdraw my name from Tom Pace's Most-Intelligent-Fullback-in-the-Nation Contest. There are several reasons for this drastic move, aside from the obvious one. In the first place, I never played that position for any length of time; I played left half on a T and right half on the single wing.

In the second place, I have played no football, except the corner lot variety, since the dear dead days of 1945. I have never gone out for football here at the University of Texas, a correction which I hope you will note; I want no credit for something I do not in the least deserve. But thanx for the vote, Tom. Thou art my friend forever.

George Ebey informs me that Lord Byron wrote chiefly about Lord Byron, which is true to some extent. All poets create out of their own experiences, whether mental or physical, tho I will grant that Byron is exceptionally self-centered.

However, I do not believe that fact alters my point—that nine out of ten people haven't the faintest notion (understanding might be a better word) of what he was trying to say. To understand the poetry of Byron, you must first understand the man—and that, I submit, is no easy task. A fascinating individual.

I seem to have found a worthy dissenter in Mr. Wehling, a fellow Texan. I thought his remarks were quite intelligent and shrewd; the man is a persuasive debater. But I do not agree with him and would like, briefly, to defend my position.

I said that any writing was literature—a dubious distinction, possibly—when it enabled the reader to *share* and *understand* the aspect of life that it tried to present. Mr. Wehling states that the above definition would include every dime pulp yarn ever written. That is quite definitely not the case, as a little reflection will show.

Mr. Wehling states that the primary concern of literature is the "interior human being"—an ambiguous phrase calculated to drive any semanticist into the DT wards. Just what, precisely, *is* the "interior human being," pray tell? How do you go about separating it from its implicit corollary, the outer human being? I daresay that what Mr. Wehling has in mind is what might be loosely termed the "soul" in the general—not religious—sense of the word.

All right. What story have you ever read that enabled you to share and understand a part of life that was written on a purely two-dimensional, "outer" level? His point is implicit in my definition. You cannot make a sharp division between body and soul; where does one leave off and the other begin?

Granting their existence, the two act on each other. It is like the old bugaboo of heredity and environment. *Both* contribute in some measure to *every* act of the individual, even though the relationship be at times an obscure one. You cannot have one without the other.

I would be willing, for the sake of argument, to grant to Mr. Wehling that no science fiction story has ever been written that is literature. But to say that it never can *become* literature is absurd. Science fiction, when all is said and done, is simply a coined word used to designate imaginative fiction with a scientific basis. Any type of writing whatsoever is possible within those limits, from epic poetry to a penetrating study of the "inner life" of say—a lonely soldier on a spaceship, a million miles from home.

Very little "literature" will come out of pulp magazines, at least in their present stage of development, because of the editorial taboos, requirements and restrictions. But that is not to say that science fiction can never become literature. Possibly PURPLE TALES OF PALPITATING PASSION never produced a literary gem—would you thus declare that the love story could never find a place in literature?

Having been thus logical and grimly academic, I will now bring down the wrath of the gods on my brow by stating that I think Ray Bradbury can stand comparison with either Wolfe or Lawrence, and that very easily. Wait and see, good people. You'll hear from Bradbury before he's through.

In conclusion, I'd like to mention that I heartily enjoyed Leigh Brackett's *The Moon that Vanished* in the October TWS, and was rather surprised to note its lukewarm reception. It struck me as one of Leigh's better efforts, and was quite pleasantly reminiscent of Friend Merritt. Oh Ghu—here we go again.—*2400 Tower Drive, Austin, Texas.*

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Thanks for taking time off from the books, Chad. As usual, you have inculcated into your missive a few cuds of thought upon which to ruminate. We often wonder why so many people set up arbitrary boundaries within which literature is or is not to be found—they claim.

Inevitably we creep back to a saying of our father—a man who knew considerable of the ways and means of writing in his not-so-distant day. Once, speaking of critics, he said, "They tend to weigh a work's importance by the specific gravity of the subject treated."

Your friend George Gordon, the late Lord Byron, was indeed a fascinating Scotsman. And confidentially, we've always been just a mite grateful that Lady Caroline Lamb never hid under *our* bed. It's enough to drive anyone to poetry.

CALLING DR. WATSON
by Wilkie Connor

Dear Editor: A. E. Van Vogt and Virgil Finlay have combined their talents to make THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER one of the most enjoyable stories I've ever read since I've been reading science fiction. Truly a wonderful story, beautifully illustrated. Tell us, dear editor, shall we have more of the same?

In your introductory remarks for READER SPEAKS, you have really hit the proverbial nail smack on the cranium! STF would definitely benefit if some author came along with a new and different character. Characters make stories. Plot and treatment, even the quality of writing, are merely the trimmings, the side dishes.

There are many fine minds in the STF field of authorship. There is no need to waste space by mentioning even a few of them here. Surely, some place, there is an author, either published or unpublished, who can and will create such a character as you spoke about.

Yet when one thinks about such an undertaking, one realizes just how impossible it would be *deliberately* to create such a character. It would be as impossible as it would be to deliberately write a best seller or a hit tune. Surely, A. C. Doyle didn't set about creating Sherlock and Watson deliberately, with the idea in mind of upsetting the entire short story world.

Neither did Margaret Mitchell intend to write a best-seller when she wrote Gone With the Wind. Nor did she intend to start a trend of lovable villainesses when she created Scarlet. Yet even unto now, books are appearing in large numbers featuring sexy, ruthless women as their lead characters.

I believe when a really startling STF character appears, it will descend upon the reading world totally unexpected. First, there will be an inconspicuous short or novelet in one of the pulps.

Someone will grab it up for an anthology. Thus heartened, the author will write a few more yarns about his character. A big shot agent will take notice, and promote sale of the character to the slicks and/or movies. That character will do a lot for the entire reading world, and science fiction will have come into the rich place in world literature it deserves. But such an event must take place within the next 10 or 20 years—otherwise there will be no science fiction.

Such fiction as we call STF will be merely adventure fiction. Therefore it will behoove any STF editor to carefully read any legible story that comes into his ken—for who knows but what the next envelope in the slush pile will contain THAT story?

The Bradbury-Sterling situation was one I'd been anticipating for a long time. Which proves what I've been suspecting for a long time—fans like an author or they don't. If they like him, anything he writes is of pure gold; if they don't, nothing he writes is appreciated.

I believe in judging a story on its merits as a story alone. I never read a story just because Ray Bradbury or Hank Kuttner wrote it. I never pass judgment on a yarn because I liked other stories by that author. I read for entertainment and I don't give a darn who writes what I read. I think that is as it should be!—*1618 McFarland Avenue, Gastonia, North Carolina.*

We take issue with but one item in your provocative letter (another ten years on the slush pile without time off for good behavior—ouch!). The point we find moot is your statement that stf will be but adventure fiction in another scant few decades.

This is not so. Much of what is now considered stf (trips to the Moon and perhaps the nearer planets) may have lapsed into the more prosaic category but space-flight, after all, is but one small facet of the field. There are still the microcosm, the macrocosm, the stars, time travel, contiguous worlds and a myriad other subjects which will scarcely be old at by, say, 1980.

So perhaps our Sherlock, who or whatever, to say nothing of whenever he may be, will still have plenty of room to maneuver in even should his coming be lamentably delayed. Pardon us while we turn sadly back to the slush pile, sadly but ever hopefully.

CALLING WATSON'S NEEDLE
by Edwin J. Moran

Sir: Your remarks in the February TWS regarding the growth of science fiction were apropos up to a certain point. And that was the point you were trying to make. Your logic (Aristotelianism, Null-A, your own?) seems to me to be faulty in forecasting a Sherlock Holmes for stf. I seriously doubt that such a character is either desirable or possible for stf.

Murder stories almost always have had a detective as the chief protagonist. Holmes could drag the whole field with him because basically the whole field was alike—i.e. the same format, the crime, the investigation and the solution, with more or less the same cast of characters, victim, murders, suspects, detective and Watson.

Infinite variations, if you like, but all on the same theme (by Poe). But no one character will dramatize stf with its infinite basic themes before the general reading public. What will. Science fiction is the offspring, by no means illegitimate, of science and literature.

The stf public is growing steadily as a result of scientific advances and a group of fine writers (you editors take a bow here too). My solution to the projection of stf's popularity before the general public and far beyond any editor's wildest dreams is that first rocket to the Moon.

A few comments on the February issue—although it was obvious that humans were unknowingly doing the dirty work in THE CARRIERS, the author's explanation is strictly phony. When a gimmick of this sort is used in stf it should have some scientific or at least pseudo-scientific basis, far-fetched though it may be. Merwin is guilting of the same literary crime as the mystery writer who conceals the clues from the reader.

Van Vogt's THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER was engrossing, but what I call his obscurity (probably my stupidity) prevented full enjoyment of this tale. I often have this trouble with van Vogt but he remains one of my favorites.

Crime stories in stf, such as MESSENGER, do not appeal to me. Each to his own taste, of course.

The rest of the issue was okay with Bradbury lead-

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ing the pack. And of course a special Oscar to Tremaine for his fine article on heredity, which even an ignoramus like me could understand.—*144 East Pike Street, Canonsburg, Penna.*

Okay yourself, Ed, except for one thing. We quote our own editorial in the February issue in question—

". . . Consequently science fiction is on the march. But today, as never before, it needs a Sherlock Holmes and his Watson. We do not mean a pseudoscientific detective, of course. We do mean that a character of eye-catching traits equivalent to those of the master of Baker Street is needed to lift stf out of the specialized into the generally popular reading fields. . . ."

We also pointed out that the detective story moved into prominence along with the spread of public interest in crime as developed largely through the first-blooming sensational newspapers of fifty and more years ago. Conan Doyle and his colleagues owed a lot to Jack the Ripper and Dr. Crippen and the publicity they received in a then new medium.

Currently newspaper interest in science is growing prodigiously. And the rocket to the Moon, when it comes, will be its Jack the Ripper manyfold. But it won't be science fiction's Sherlock.

SOME LIKE THEM LONG
by Aubrey Carruth, Jr.

Dear Editor: It finally happened. The February '49 T.W.S. had as its cover story a full length novel. The Weapon Shops of Isher rates as one of the classics in SF. And it is without a doubt the best story T.W.S. has printed recently. The raves will be pouring in by the basketfull from the fans so I will leave well enough alone and just say, more van Vogt please.

I hope the editorial policy of T.W.S. is to continue to print full length novels. In the past I have always rated the average S.S. issue higher than the average T.W.S. issue because of the absence of longer yarns in the latter. It's the old story of the good big man and the good little man.

Another item about editorial policy before continuing. When I first began reading S.S. and T.W.S. in early '48, Sargent Saturn and his Xeno fed Bum or whatever you call them, were just bad memories in the minds of the older fans, as was witnessed by the letters in TRS and TEV.

However, in the past year or so the editorials not only were of 100% better quality but they contained thought-provoking theories that would be of real interest to the SF fan. All I can say is—it's about time. No offense Ed. Speaking of a master of Baker Street to lift Stf into the popular field, Heinlein made a small try. Whom could you recommend? I'd like to hear some fan comments on the subject.

The Orig Prem series has hit full tilt with this recent selection. Miller has something here. It reminds me of the "You Are There" series in radio, only in reverse. Both are good.

This anthology idea is a humdinger. You'll be getting my list (who wants it?) soon. I must throw one more orchid your way before leaving. Good articles such as "From Peas to Horses to Men" have a place in your magazine. You have been keeping it well filled.—*307 East 89th Street, New York 28, New York.*

Such nice soothing syrup! However, TWS will, except in rare instances, continue to run somewhat shorter lead novels than its companion, STARTLING STORIES. The Leigh Brackett SEA KINGS OF MARS in the current issue is one of the exceptions. We like them long—but we like them short, short short and middle-sized too.

As for the Sherlock—we recommend no one as yet. We're still too busy on the slush pile. And if you don't know what that is, it's unsolicited, unagented manuscripts. We read 'em all.

WHAT IS ART—OR IS IT?
by James MacGregor, M.A.

Dear Editor: It was with some surprise that I caught the tail-end of a discussion of poetry in TWS. I may be wrong, but I think TWS should leave poetry alone and stick to BEMs—whatever they are—especially when the editor is inclined to agree with Marion Zimmer that poetry is not a free outrush of feeling whatever form it may take or how clumsy its rhythm.

There is no science of poetry, of course, but there is a science of criticism as an epiphenomenon of poetry. Most of the people who built it up were poets. And to say "it's my opinion that poetry is . . ." is asking for trouble when what poetry is has been settled broadly for a long time and the main argument remaining is simply over the words to use to express the conclusion. In case Marion Zimmer remains interested, this is the brief academic summary—

Poetry is the essence of experience; it is truth or like truth; it is a blend of imagination with reason, first, but also of all the possible activities and qualities of the mind.

This comes from Shelley ("A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. . . It is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds"), Blake ("One power alone makes a poet. Imagination, the Divine Vision") and, of course, Coleridge ("The poet brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends and fuses each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination").

No word about form. The antithesis to prose is verse; the nearest antithesis to poetry that Coleridge could find was science—certainly not prose, which is frequently poetry. Miss Zimmer mentions Lovecraft. The only production of his I remember as being poetry was a short story written in prose. His verse as I remember it was just good verse.

Miss Zimmer is right when she infers that free verse is not poetry, but only as she would be right to say that prose is not poetry and verse is not poetry. They all *can* be poetry, and often are.—*21 Rosehill Place, Aberdeen, Scotland.*

Well, heck, there's Edwin Lear, too. And Gelette Burgess. And Charles Stuart Calverly, whose appalling parody of Longfellow's *River Charles* caused us to wash our hands of not only that vichyized Tennyson but his English original. And the guy who wrote *John Gilpin's Ride.*

You and Oliver should be able to tee off on Byron handily. Us, we'll stick to Zimmer and the ridiculous urbanities of formalized verse.

We like 'em, that's all. And, in parting, may we also say that you are indubitably correct?

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RISE AND FALL
by Nita Dempsey-Miller

Dear Sir: I enjoyed your editorial in the February issue very much. May I ask for another one on the rise and fall of the science and fantasy magazines? I have read them for over twenty years and can find no connection or explanation for the swing in quality from good to poor. Some of Wonder Stories' best came at a time of starvation in circulation.

TWS seems on the upswing. How come? Is it word rates—is it a hunt for new advertising—is it a hint for more circulation?

I hope you will see fit to write us an editorial and clear up this dark mystery.—*1030 South Lemon, El Cajon, California.*

It hardly rates an editorial, Nita. Naturally, part of all magazine editing and publishing is a hunt for increased circulation. As for story quality, it depends on three factors—1.) what the authors are producing —2.) what the editor wants and can get them to produce—3.) what the public will stand for as revealed by circulation figures. And that's all there is to it. Simple—our foot!

BLUNT STUFF
by Roy R. Wood

Dear Editor: This is what I think of TWS and SS—they are two of the best stf mags on the market. They have only one fault and that is the covers.

This is how I rate the stories in the last issue of TWS. *The Weapon Shops of Isher* was easily the best of the lot. Van Vogt is the best author you have. The *Weakness of Rvog* was about average, not bad but not a masterpiece. *Monsters From the West* was o.k. I guess if you like that kind of stories but personally I didn't like it.

Assignment On Pasik was another of the average ones. *The Man* was the best of the shorts, I think Bradbury is the best of the short story writers. My taste runs more to novels though. *The Carriers* was second best of the shorts.

The Himalaychalet seemed rather pointless to me as all the Oona and Jick stories do. I suppose that some fans like that type though. *The Messenger* was good but not up to some of Sturgeon's other work.

Is there a fan club in North Carolina, and if not why not? If there is would someone let me know about it? I'd like to join it.

One more thing—if all the satories in the mag were awful (which they're not) I would still buy the mag for the letters. They're as interesting as the stories to me.—*Box 608, Boone, North Carolina.*

Welcome to the ranks, Roy. It seems to me our Mr. Conner of Gastonia (ibid) is pretty well up on Tarheel fanactivities. Perhaps he will contact you or vice versa. Good luck at any rate and study THE FRYING PAN carefully this issue.

IF WE DON'T MIND!
by Lin Carter

Dear Ed: There are a few things I'd like to say about the February number, if you don't mind.

I enjoyed the van Vogt story immensely. I always enjoy his stories, but I don't understand them. I've read WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER twice now, and there are still several things I don't quite get. F'rinstance: how did it all end? What happened to the other Cayle Clark, and what did he have to do with the plot? Just what is the immortal superhuman, Captain Hedrock, and how did he achieve his powers? What happened to the Time-Pendulum?

I may be stupid, but I just don't get it all. Not knowing very much about semantics, time-mechanics or philosophy, I usually can't figure out the van Vogt yarns.

Now a few words about the issue in general. It was, probably, one of the most unbalanced, hodge-podges I have ever seen. Superb inside pix by Finlay and the lurid, brazen cover. The mature, polished and technical lead novel and a mediocre bunch of shorts including the sickening, stupid St. Clair item.

In the first place, I can't for the life of me figure out why you would buy that van Vogt yarn. It doesn't fit in TWS. Not at all the type of fiction you usually print.

But enough of this. I really shouldn't complain who published the story, I should be glad somebody did, because it was a good story. Thanks for printing it.—*1734 Newark St. So., St. Petersburg, Fla.*

Enough of that is right, Lin. What on earth were you eating before you sat down to write that one? Whew!

SHE STICKS TO HER GUNS
by Rickey Slavin

Dear Editor: Your editorial snickers to the contrary I still stick to my original opinion—the story, REFERENT, by Ray Bradbury-Sterling, was a flop. I have always said that Ray is one of my favorite authors but now I'll have to change that. It only goes to show you that even the best of us can come up with a lemon now and then.

About this month's stories—I shall be a lot less harsh with you. Van Vogt—the best. This is one of the few vV opera I could understand. Blish & Knight—very good. Weak in theory in part but good withal. Miller—I even read and liked Orig Prem. This was slightly less horrible than the others but I was either in a good mood or I have an affinity for skunks (any boy friends, please peruse carefully). Fitzgerald—good. Bradbury—I still love Bradbury but now I look upon him with more critical eyes. The theme was superb and the workmanship fine, but is the plot suitable for stf? Sam Merwin Jr—who is this guy? Maybe some schmoe but he writes fairly well. This one was particularly interesting because of its treatment of the woman-space traveler problem. Denks for de vimmin. St. Clair—fine. Sturgeon—very fine. Tremaine—I don't know whether to list the articles with the fiction but this was swell.

Perhaps you might be interested in the theme I wrote for English last term. It contains a complete history of fandom and now science fiction is enlarged by three new readers. Anyone who read it is now an addict.—*1626 Coney Island Avenue, Brooklyn 30, New York.*

Why not send the theme to the *Saturday Review*—or the *Atlantic?* It is almost certainly far too advanced for us!

SOAP WHAT?
by John E. Potter

Dear Editor: Would you like to hear my evaluation of the stories in feb wonder? You wouldn't? Alright, I am happy to oblige; as follows:

Weapon Shops—simply wonderful! Weakness of Rvog—fair. Monsters from West—smelled too—why print that Orig Prem tripe? Assignment on Pasik—very good! The Man—a poor story, Ray. The Carriers—morbid and impossible. Himalaychalet—send Oona and Jick after Prem, only more gently. Messenger—fair. Reader Speaks—tell Kagan not to write so cute; he sounds like a fat girl—good for you, WpMeyer!—enjoyed Temple's letter and your comment—Hello Gwen, pleased to meet another intelligentsia—hah, Lee Budoff and *her* ponderously verbose expressions (I can hardly spell that)—enjoyed GeOrge Ebey's letter and your comment.

Now that I have politely conformed with the above useful comments, how would you readers like to reconsider an issue that long ago is supposed to have been settled. Soap—is it good for you or not? Let me hastily interject that I use soap, because it hasn't oc-

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curred to someone to invent something better.

Soap removes dirt by enveloping loose particles and by carrying away the coating of oil on the skin. Now, supposing it could be measured, how much energy does the body have to expend to replace that lost oil and to heal the thousands of cracks left in the skin (in winter, especially) by this harsh treatment?

How much is the wrinkled skin of middle age due to the constant rubbing of the skin of its lubricating oils all through life? Finally, chemists, how would you go about solving the problem of washing without soap? Vast corporations will shudder at this idea, but I think that soap will soon become obsolete!—*P.O. Box 912, Darien, Conn.*

We wouldn't know—we're obsolete ourselves already.

WHAT'S THIS?
by Bob Farnham

Dear Editor: Just a few lines to thank you for another swell issue. I even liked the cover!!

Have been wanting for some time to get hold of The Weapon Shops Of Isher and at last my hopes have been fulfilled.

St. Clair has come up with another true-to-life story. Got quite a laugh out of it.

Seems a pity Stieve and Orig Prem had to go back so far to find skunks. Plenty of them in any Big Town of our day!

You should meet the one I work for!

From Peas To Horses To Men certainly is thought provoking and well worth studying—moreso to anyone with a limited education.

TRS was good as always.

The whole durn mag was good. In fact—it was SWELL!!—*1139 East 44th St., Chicago 15, Ill.*

Before such oil (the old soap, no doubt) we stand speechless and abashed. But don't think we don't love it. We do.

MORE OF SAME?
by Helena Schwimmer

Dear Editor: I once promised myself that I wouldn't write a letter to any mag until I had seen at least one issue that had no poor stories. Well, at last it has happened—van Vogt, Bradbury, Blish & Knight, Merwin, St. Clair, Sturgeon and a good letter section. I'm shocked.

I think the article was worth while too—let's see more like it.

Hmmmm. Nor Storer. I seem to remember a poem of his about a frog and a corpse on the ocean. Howzabout sending me a copy?—*1370 College Avenue, Bronx 56, New York.*

We aren't abashed any longer—we're getting accustomed to it. Let's hope Storer comes through, Helena. Write us again.

WE'RE STILL IN
by Don Day

Dear Editor: Herewith the latest FANSCIENT, No. 6. Hope you continue to treat it as kindly as you have in the past. Which brings us to your little discussion of Norm Storer's piece in the February TW's "Frying Pan."

This seems a good point to sound off on my own version of the same subject. Storer definitely had a point in that the author who can make the reader want to step into the locale he depicts will produce a popular story. That is not all though.

With the exception of certain types, notably the humorous yarn, a story depends on "identification" for its impact. It may be outright identification with a leading character or it may be a case of the reader mentally putting himself into the locale depicted while he goes on to tell his own story.

If you will cast your mind back over the truly memorable stories of the past, you will find that most of them have this quality. The reader says to himself, "Boy, what I could do with a set-up like that." "Doc" Smith's interplanetary epics have it. Van Vogt has it. Bradbury has it, as do virtually all of the more successful authors.

In the action stories, you get more of the direct identification with the hero as he mows down all opposition with his fists or zap-guns, but that stimulation generally ends when the magazine is laid down. The more enduring type of identification which makes the "classic"—the story long remembered—is more on an intellectual level.

It may be in possession of some bit of knowledge not shared by others; it may be an environment, a set of circumstances. Whatever it is the reader continues to picture the scenes or the events long after the story is finished.

But enough of that. The February issue is continuing to hold the high standard you have set of late. THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER is of the quality that put van Vogt on top. The only jarring note was that its sudden end came a shock. I expected it to be longer, but that may be because I read it in fragments. About the only chance I have to read is on the bus and during my lunch hour.

Tremaine's second article is excellent. You're fortunate in getting a capable writer who can present so much meat with such enjoyable sauce. Tremaine, incidentally, under his pen name of Warner van Lorne, wrote a number of the type of story I mentioned above, the best being WORLD OF THE PURPLE LIGHT and STRANGE CITY.

Bradbury's THE MAN will undoubtedly be remembered as one of the best he has done to date. How can that man keep on topping himself?

WEAKNESS OF RVOG has a nice gimmick and is well presented.

Seems like every time I write commenting on the stories, I start repeating myself. So sorry, but like Bradbury's yarn in this issue, THE CARRIERS is one of the best stf yarns you've had yet.

The Orig Prem series is beginning to wear at the seams, tho MONSTERS FROM THE WEST is one of the best so far in the series.

THE HYMALAYCHALET and MESSENGER weren't up to their authors' usual standards but Jenkins' ASSIGNMENT ON PASIK ended up the issue with a bang.

Well, that's it—not a poor story in the issue and several excellent ones. Keep up the good work.—*3435 NE 38th Ave., Portland 13, Oregon.*

Your pre-critical thesis is interesting, Don, as are the rest of your writings, in or out of your fanzine. What this business comes down to is this—a good, great or fine writer has the ability to project the majority of his readers, whatever their cares of the moment, into the mood he chooses to set for his story. Or, perhaps, the mood his story sets for itself.

Without this faculty of dominating the reader a writer is generally condemned to the lower ranks of whatever field he may tackle—be it the detective story, science fiction or belles lettres. This one ability is the basis of so-called "talent" or even "genius"—and reader identification with the protagonist is usually, if not always, an essential part thereof. We wish more of our writers had it. Then you readers would enjoy our magazine more than you do.

SINCERE, SINCERE!
by Charles Lee Riddle

Dear Editor: Congratulations, *sincere congratulations*, on obtaining Van Vogt's novel, "The Weapon

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Shops of Isher." Without a doubt, it is the finest bit of writing that you have published in the numerous issues of TWS. I have read other stories in this series in another magazine and in a recent anthology, but this is the best of the lot.

Please, editor, hold on to this author and give us more stories in this series. The action is fast-moving, coherent, and the plot is well laid-out. But, then, that is what we readers have come to expect from Mr. Van Vogt, and would be greatly disappointed if he didn't give it to us in each story he writes.

I won't comment on the rest of the stories in the February issue, but all in all, I enjoyed this issue. I have been reading TWS from way back and before the war it was my favorite science fiction magazine. While in service with the navy during the war, I more or less drew away from TWS. But now, oh brother—since you've increased your contents, in quantity and QUALITY, I haunt the newsstands for new issues of TWS! It's well worth every bit of the quarter you charge! _

Keep up the good work, and again I repeat—more Weapon Shop stories!—*2116 Edsall Court, Alameda, California.*

Thanks, Charley, and may your amateur publishing prosper. Hope you like the SEA KINGS in this issue as well. We did despite its difference from the van Vogt epos.

TYRO
by Mrs. E. O. Westman

Dear Ed: After reading my first copy of TWS I'm still gasping but happy. Also, after reading TWS am emboldened to write my first note to an editor.

Back to the gasping—I'm a heart patient—but generally have no patience except when playing with a very small stamp collection. The hours are extremely long but TWS sent them flying so—a plea to your readers.

Does anyone have some old or new copies of stf they'd like to send along to a lonely gal? Any mags not expected to be returned, as I've no way to get to the post office to return them?

WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER was tops. Your cover was but good.—*143 Richfield Avenue, El Cajon, California.*

Thanks for reading and liking us, Mrs. Westman. I hope that printing this letter will get you your wish. Good luck and write again, please.

RUGGED STUFF
by George Farrell, Jr.

Dear Editor: This is the first time I have ever written to TWS and wouldn't be writing now, except that the "Weapon Shops of Isher" didn't set well at all, but that'll come later.

About three years ago, while sitting in my uncle's parlor and having nothing to do, I picked up a copy of your magazine and started reading. I liked it so well that I went downstreet and bought one of my own and haven't missed a copy since. I like both TWS and SS the way they are, but will gladly accept any improvements, so keep up the good work.

But now to the "Weapon Shops of Isher". To begin, I am a Junior at the University of Connecticut and am majoring in mathematics and physics, the following being a modification of what I've been taught.

A strain on fixed point if not sustained will create harmonic motion at that point. Now, McAllister, the reporter, was displaced from his own time, 19**, to another, Isher 4784, thereby generating a stress in time. McAllister's equation of motion, in time, should be somewhat similar to the ordinary differential equation for spacial harmonic motion:

$$A\frac{d^2x}{dt^2} \quad B\frac{dx}{dt} \quad Cx=0,$$

Where $A\frac{d^2x}{dt^2}$ is the stressing force, $B\frac{dx}{dt}$ is the resistance to the motion, and Cx is the displacement from the point of origin, which in McAllister's case is from 19** to Isher 4784. If there were no resistance on him he would undergo simple harmonic motion. If there were, it would be damped harmonic motion, which would eventually bring him back to his equalibrium positon.

If, however, a harmonic force, other than the stressing force, were applied either of two things could be existant. First, this force could be out of phase, retarding motion; or second, it could be completely in phase and would then be resonant. This latter condition naturally would cause dangerous stresses in the medium, time in this case.

Further, McAllister could not amass a potential by his swings; for any forward increase would be expended going backward, and vice versa. This follows from the law that states that the energy expended by moving a mass from one point to another is independent of the path, if there is no friction.

It is, therefore, self-evident that McAllister could not have amassed such a potential that he exploded. And further, since the building that was causing the trouble returned to its own time, McAllister should have returned to his, in-order-to maintain chronological equalibrium. That, I guess, is about all I have to say.—*South Coventry, Connecticut.*

And it's much too much for us—especially those dt's in the denominators of your algebraic fractions. *Students!*

NOTHING TO RAVE ABOUT
by R. E. Martin

Dear Ed: February ish was a little above average but nothing to rave about. Van Vogt's "Weapon Shop" novel was fine but I think he should stick to A.

The Blish-Knight novelet was interesting but it didn't leave me with anything.

I was worried for a while but it's alright now. I think the Orig Prem stories are up with the best on lafs and at times you can find something besides lafs, too. So, please, don't junk him.

"Assignment on Pasik" was alright. Would have been better if Stannard had been developed into a more likeable person in the beginning.

I rather like these stories taken from the Bible, now and then. There are a lot of good ideas for stories in the Bible, especially, I find, in the books of Genesis and Revelation. However the story of the creation of Man has been a bit overworked.

I liked the "Carriers" but I couldn't figure out exactly what they were carrying.

Oona and Jick, as usual, were good for a few lafs.

Don't think "Messenger" was quite up to Sturgeon's usual level. The story was clever but lacked the punch I expected.

Tremaine's series is looking better and better.

In "Reader Speaks" you printed six letters from people who griped about "Referent". I do agree with Jay D. Mann but I don't think much of the way the others condemned it because they couldn't understand it.

In my opinion these people merely showed us just how ignorant, unthinking and intollerant they are. It all seems to go back to "condemn if you can't understand it." Several years back a lot of good books were burned because of this feeling.

Now that I have that out of my system I have a gripe with your mag (add this to your long, long list). Please stop putting those terrible cover picks on your mag.—*Rt. 1, Box 338, Colma, California.*

You'd better get together with the art department on the covers. Personally, we think Bergey does a fine job. But again, that's our opinion and you are entitled to yours. In fact, you can have them.

Stories taken from the Bible are, or would

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be, all right but for the curious stultifying effect the Bible seems to have on writers who attempt to base stories on it. They have a lamentable way of turning into sermons at the drop of a shift key.

LUNG EXERCISES
by Joan Henderson

Dear Editor: I have been reading your magazine for quite some time and I have never had a big enough gripe to yell about—yet. But I think it's time for me to start exercising my lungs—right now.

Let's take the stories in rotation as the contents page lists them, shall we? First is the novel, THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER, by van Vogt. The plot and setting were good. Also the characters. But, *dear* Editor, one finds too much of the trash he wrote about. You can get that sort of stuff in any cheap novel. The reason, I believe, that most people read scientifiction is because they like to think of our world being as advanced as the story, or hope it will be. Mr. van Vogt stresses too much the "Houses of Illusion". I could go on and on to make a long story long, but most of that story was terrible. Oh, but I'll have to admit it was well written!

WEAKNESS OF RVOG—not too good but passable. MONSTERS FROM THE WEST—these Orig Prem stories are awful. So they went back in time—so all right. But those hot dog stands and slang-talking Neanderthals—ugh! Take them out! ASSIGNMENT ON PASIK—good. I liked it. Three cheers for Bill Fitzgerald. THE MAN—so-so. Kind of weak if you ask me—which you probably won't.

THE CARRIERS—I liked this all but one thing. Mr. Merwin, to my mind, failed to finish the story (He did so—Ed.). He left me guessing. The suspense is killing me. ". . . she laughed. 'Have you got a cigarette?'" Bah! HIMALAYACHALET—what a title! Just fair. MESSENGER—good. Crime never pays.

Well, there it is. Being a bit of a writer myself, I won't criticize too much. All of these stories are probably better than I could write—or are they? Don't be too harsh with me, Ed., this is my first letter. You have a fine magazine and I just wish my stuff were good enough to submit—but I know it isn't. By the way, I liked the cover—I always do.—*472 Tenino Street, Martinsburg, W. Va.*

We'll look forward to seeing your stuff, Joan.

TOO MUCH TO DO
by Franklin M. Dietz, Jr.

Dear Editor: Sitting here, I'm just wondering why it is that a fan, especially an acti-fan, always seems to take on just a little more than he can successfully accomplish. It is an interesting, and quite perplexing problem. Me, for instance . . . no, I won't go into boring details.

This, the Feb. '49 issue of TWS, has been eagerly awaited by all, I'm sure. At least I fit into that group. And all because of the van Vogt novel which was therein. Many have been the former stories of van Vogt to appear, and in my time I can remember only one I didn't like superbly. But for an enthusiastic follower of van Vogt, I feel this "Weapon Shop" story gave one a letdown.

Sure, it was well-written and all that, yet the slanting of it, very apparent to me, didn't help it one iota. More, it pulled down what might have been another swell story by van Vogt. But I've berated the story enough. It was good reading, and the rest of the stories were fine too, very good.

As usual, the letter column, so ably titled by me as "The Reader Squeaks", was good. (Somewhat so because my letter was included.) But—wherever did you get the idea of fan dancers? Never heard of such. And if you referred to the club I mentioned, let me assure you we are a club of *fan artists.*

I'm still praising your excellent editorials too, they're very good. You know, you ought to call Tremaine's series guest editorials. They hit their point too, without doubt.—*P. O. Box 696, Kings Park, L. I., New York.*

Guest editorials yet—no, no, no! And with us howling for article and feature material. As for the slanting on the van Vogt—there was none that we know of. We sent the story back once for a bit more explanation at a couple of crucial points. Judging from the majority of your letters we should have asked for a bit more. But there was no "slanting" involved. We don't believe in it and one of the reasons for your latter-day approval of this magazine (we hope) is our insistence that all authors cut it out and just give us the best they can muster.

THOROUGHLY CONFUSED
by Alvin R. Brown

Dear Editor: Bergey, bless his little palette, has foisted another one of his so-called artistic covers on a poor and unsuspecting fandom.

Van Vogt now has me thoroughly confused by virtue of my having read the preceding and following stories in the Weapon Shop saga. Still, it was one of van Vogt's better stories and made pleasant reading.

The Weakness of Rvog wasn't too bad but it left me wanting to read something by Azimov, at least his robot yarns. The other two novelets didn't. I seem to have lost my taste for Prem and Pasik left me cold.

Maybe I am getting hypercritical, but the shorts seem to be pretty poor this time, even Bradbury laying a fat one. Oona is a trifle ridiculous, a sort of super gadget Queen. And they aren't even good gadget stories. I could pull a pun, i.e., "Oona makes me need a little psychoSOMAtic treatment", but it wouldn't be appreciated so what's the use.

Tremaine's articles continue to amaze and interest me; one of the most worthwhile series I have ever read and it alone would be worth the price of the magazine.

The Reader Speaks gets more voluble as time goes on and makes one of the high points in reading for me, which includes the sass that you throw back at the erstwhile fan.

From the hints that you are dropping about the future issues, I expect wonderful things from TWS and SS.

Someone will drop the boom on me and say, "Why in hell don't you stop reading TWS if the stories are so bad?" To this unknown person I have this to say, "It isn't that it is so bad but rather that it could be so much better."

And that sums up what I think, bigger and better stories both in literary quality and handling of plot and characterization. And, if I may be permitted one snide comment, better and a little bit more sane covers.—*227 So. Quad., Iowa City, Iowa.*

We'll keep looking for those biggers and betters and trust that you regain your taste for our shorter tales. Don't forget, much of the best writing in stf history has gone into these so-called "lesser" efforts and will undoubtedly continue to do so.

FREEPORTATION
by Virginia L. Shawl

Dear Editor: This is fan #2 coming in from that "outpost" of Terran civilization—Freeport. . .

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Let all men present know that Freeport is known from Sirius to Saturn as being *the very hub of the Universe!* With the ovation of thousands ringing in her ears, she sat down. And who was the moron in the third row who gave that Bronx cheer?

But leave us not quibble over mere details; not, that is, while ye editor is breathlessly awaiting this highly censored report on the Feb. issue! The answer to the old question what's-in-a-name, would seem to have been answered. Can it be that there is a magic charm in the letters R-a-y B-r-a-d-b-u-r-y? And what would the reaction have been if "Square Pegs" had been printing under the byline of Brett Sterling—or "Referent" under Bradbury? I wonder. . .

Comes the sixty-four-dollar question. How did "Assignment To Pasik" get in? It is vaguely reminiscent of that old folk-song: "—and the Villian still pursued her." There should be a special spot reserved in the nether realm for authors that present situations like this. The heroine flashes the twenty-fourth century equivalent of a .45 under the hero's nose. "Die, you foul dog!" she hisses. The hero, brawny he-man that he is, disarms this frail, fair blossom of the weaker sex. Then, completely enthralled by this quivering mass of mighty masculinity, she spreads herself all over his manly chest. Ha!

Always one finds oneself murmuring. "If you're going to shoot the bum—shoot him. Don't stand there waving that gun around like a pancake turner. It ain't practical, babe!"

Please take Oona and Jick out into the vast expanse of some Martian desert and let them meditate there. Just let them meditate—and don't bring them back.

What is really bringing forth howls of anguish is the lead novel. Van Vogt's "Weapon Shops of Isher" is wonderful—it's superb—it simply brims with deep thought. It is full of sound and fury—and signifies exactly nothing! Three times hath I waded through its immortal lines, searching vainly for some small thread of plot. Only to finish with a mad gleam in mine eyes. It is expected that there will be pages of letters exalting it as a marvelous piece of fiction. A small wager will be laid that the writers won't know any more about what it was all about than I did. Anyone want to make something of that?

Why must TWS and SS always come out with the kind of covers you slip under your coat? Are they supposed to add appeal to the mag? Is it a lost battle? Or does there remain even yet one small shred of hope that someday TWS will come forth with a decent piece of artwork on its cover?

Having unloaded this cargo of poisoned ink—farewell.—*Big Springs Farm, Freeport, Illinois.*

Fan No. 1 in this case was Joe Gibson, the sometime student, soldier, pro-author and fan, who ran afowl of Miss Shawl while working at a radio station there for awhile last year. Yes, perhaps we should have got still more explanation from Mr. van Vogt—though it seemed to make sense to us.

All we can do is request Virginia to unload some more poisoned ink on future numbers. So go to it, pancake turner.

ALAS, POOR ALIAS!
by Benjamin Birnbaum

Dear Ed.: I have it! Now I know why Brett Sterling, alias Ray Bradbury, always wrote, or seemed to have written, such lousy stuff. Ray used his alias to palm off his writing mistakes, therefore giving the idea that he wrote, under the Brett Sterling alias, only tripe and giving the illusion that he, under his own name, composed only masterpieces. Oh, the horror of it all! And I thought he was perfect!

Seriously, though, I wonder why the fans object so much to rough edges. If the mags are stored in a bookcase, where, by the way, they should be, the edges aren't very noticeable. In fact, there's something else that can be fixed and is even more noticeable. I refer to the outlandish combinations of colors on your bindings.

Tone 'em down a little bit. Or if you can't or don't want to do that, why don't you use the same color combination on every ish binding, as one or two of your competitors do? It would improve the look of the mag on a bookcase shelf.

No. Nono. Nononono! Get Oona and Jick, and if necessary, Miss St. Clair, into a rocket ship and send them to Sirius. Or Aldeberan. Or *anywhere* but the pages of TWS and SS. They are revolting. They are disgusting. They are horrible. (The last three adjectives apply solely to Oona and Jick, as I do not know Miss St. Clair well enough to accuse her of being those things. This is not to infer that if I knew her I *would* accuse her of being them, however.) In other words, Oona and Jick just plain smell bad. *Raus mit zey!*

Except for the OonaJickopus, and perhaps ASSIGNMENT ON PASIK, which was crude, the format was pretty good. Ditto TRS. Ditto the rest of the features. The cover, however, stumped me. Just what scene out of which story did that cover evolve from? It could come either from THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER, or from ASSIGNMENT ON PASIK. Which? Good cover, too, which was unusual. And you neglected to give cover credit on the title page. Tsk.

Well, that's all for a while. Give my regards to the Grulzaks.—*P. O. Box #26, Victory Mills, N. Y.*

Well, we certainly don't agree on Oona and Jick. But you not-quite-graduates of the blood-and-thunder school should adjust to a more rounded futureworld conception in stf. There are going to be husbands and wives—or some equivalent thereof, domestic setups and routine affairs of living which are, when viewed in proper perspective, quite as adventurous as the pursuit of the local Black Bars around the Second Galaxy.

In other words, there is plenty of room for both.

PHONYETICS
by W. Paul Ganley

Dear Editor: SUBJECT: FANHACK REQUIREMENTS: a hack letter TO: W. P. Meyer.

1. inzmutchs iwana bea nu ritr ov letrz two U im fathfly folwin thu nstrucshunz az wuz inn yur seen.

2. Did you know that in the summer Asiatic Ismugbs go infiltudle while they kalidu, and that they are usually uginfel in the pororps?

3. Sed linguas intellego, Mein Herr? Ach nein, Messieur.

4. No! No I won't! I wouldn't get my letter printed!

5. Er-r-r . . . literature? Well, Sammy Clemens wrote "Tarzan of the Apes" and Illidia Pencil penned "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" and—Oh, that's enough, eh? You don't want more. Oh, well. . . .

6. Say, you remember that thing by W. P. Meyer—oh you know him, doncha? Why sure. Well, I wanna say that I agree with him and that anyone who writes sarcastically of the letter has got me to deal with.

7. Ah yes indeed. So even TWS is publishing vVogt now, eh? Well, it's for the better. You have now gone completely modern.

8. "MONSTERS FROM THE WEST" reminds me of an old tale once published in the sadly defunct "Thrilling Blunder Stories;" and as a matter of fact I think that the author merely copied the story and put an entirely different title on it. As a matter of fact, that's the only thing different about it: let's see if I can remember—oh, yes; something like "MONSTERS FROM THE EAST" I think.

9. "THE WEAKNESS OF RVOG" A gleaming gem: RedVioletOrangeGreen.

"THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER" Well, shades of Pistol Packin' Mama! VVogt. And at his best. Excellent. Keep it up.

"ASSIGNMENT ON PASIK" combined hack and originality. Bad title. And now, as we pass on from

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Pasik, we find:

"MONSTERS FROM THE WEST" Sort of hacky, yet good; this series is not as good as the Magnus Ridolph, but nevertheless. Monstrously good, podnah!

"THE HIMALAYCHALET" (Whew! Wonder how she thought that one up?). One of the few better "Oonas."

"THE MESSENGER" which was the worst in the entire mag, ran a dead heat with

"THE CARRIERS."

And Bradbury! In this ish he was magnifique, to say the very least. He has not composed a real masterpiece for some issues now, not even in that other one in which you tricked us about Bradbury-Sterling. But this! No one but Bradbury, "THE MAN," could do this; nor, either, would another think of doing it. So he himself is the ish. He *is* it. I would have paid the twenty-five cents for that one story alone.

10. Oh my! Ohmyohmyohmyohmyohmy! ! ! ! ! What I have just said. I beg your pardon, oh exalted Bradbury; never in all time has one of your tales fallen short of expectations. And when I heard you were Sterling, I immediately sat down and read "REFERENT". Thank you for telling us of this, ed; otherwise I would never have read it.

11. I am twenty-thousand years of age, and I first began reading stf-fantasy with the initial publication of the first stf mag: THE STONE AGE DEROCHRONICLE edited by Richard S. Shaver. I attended kindergarten once, and can count up to twenty-two and a half.

12. The best d—n pic in the whole book is the one on page 61. And the worst is on pages 122-3, by some new author by name of Finlay or something like that. Oh, yes, and you mixed up the pics on the front cover and the back. They should be the other way around. And who *did* do the one on the back?

13. I object to the word "illogical". This idea is certainly probably—well, possible—that is . . . just because I want Napoli to do a cover. . . .

14. Well, I oh: erp-alp-ulp-that is, I-er- (ahem) No comment!

15. I want to join a stf club. Requirements: must have 508 members, meet in an ancient castle carried stone by stone from Great Britain, have a treasury of ninety-million poker chips and be open only to old ladies allergic to damp castles and bright red wigs. Send me a missive any time after Jan. 1, 19—.

16. Although I have had 2 letters printed, 1 of them in TWS, "This is the first time I have written any magazine," with part of my missive typed and one part (this) literally penned—with ink, yet!

I hope, Mr. Editor, that you can read my writing. Ghu knows I can't. I *did* have a poem, but I shall send it next time. Lucky, lucky you.—*119 Ward Road, North Tonawanda, New York.*

Nocommentnocommentnocommentnocommentnocommentatall.

GREAT FAILURE

by Elizabeth M. Curtis

Dear Editor: If it had not been for *The Weakness of Rvog, Monsters from the West* and *The Himalayachalet,* I should almost have wept over the story contents of the February THRILLING WONDER. Of course, the chief source of my disappointment was Bradbury's first great failure in my experience. Not even the unflagging high spirits of Orig Prem nor the ever delightful Jick and Oona nor the problem of Rvog can entirely console me when Ray misses the boat.

Apart from such little inconsistencies such as the absence of the "translating machine" in the last scene, the story seems to me to betray Bradbury's lack of knowledge about "The Man". The records of one of the planetary appearances of "The Man" do not seem to justify the treatment of the Captain by the followers of "The Man".

The records we have seem to show that "The Man" himself would never have denied his presence to anybody who was looking for him. This record also leads one to posit the character of "The Man" as one who understands a man's inability to cure himself, even if the cure was only psychological. He also made some of his most hearty enemies into his friends and ardent servants.

On the other hand, the increasing violence of the Captain is difficult to understand in terms of motivation as I understand it. It appears to be the violence of near-exhaustion, but the cause of this exhaustion is not really given.

The only solution to the entire story which I can see is that unfortunately the Captain was right at first—this was not the man.

If, by any chance it were the man, the mayor's assumption of the hyperbolic nature of the Captain's search, never quite meeting the asymptote of the presence of the man, seems unwarranted—that is, if it were the same man who once said, "Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you."

But perhaps I am not recording a change in Bradbury, only some sort of aging or mutation in myself. My reason for fearing this is that I am coming to find such a large portion of my enjoyment with TWS in the editorials and the rest of *The Reader Speaks* as well as Tremaine's articles.

I am quite intrigued with the SF-hero possibility and beg to be informed whether or not Dr. Garth Derringer Holmes, *(Rocket to the Morgue)* is really entirely without a local habitation except in the pages of this superb whodunit. The name and the character are already so well-portrayed that you might be the lucky ones to persuade Holmes (whoever he really is) to fill out the details of the stories we are waiting for.

Certainly you could use another author who lets his characters do the work instead of a plotting wheel.

In spite of the whining indulged in a paragraph or so above, I do know that TWS is getting better and better. But watch out. The better your best stories get, the worse the mediocre ones look, by comparison. When your normal run of stories is so good that even van Vogt has to be careful not to make his stories a hash of gadgets and local color, you've really got something.

Give Ray Bradbury my greeting. One flop in a great number of complete successes is nothing to worry about. It is my guess that he may be the one who comes across with the great character if Kuttner does not beat him to it. At any rate, Vive Bradbury! Vive Kuttner! and a vive St. Clair too because she is a favorite of mine.—*Apt. #201, Faculty, Veterans Village, Canton, New York.*

A fine letter all the way. Perhaps Bradbury can give you the answer you seek in his THE MAN. We're sure we can't. The story left us with a feeling of wonder and—after all—we *are* THRILLING WONDER STORIES.

As for Dr. Garth Derringer of H. H. Holmes' ROCKET TO THE MORGUE, we know of no other manifestations of him to date—and perhaps he is a bit more the actual detective than we had in mind. We really weren't thinking of stf with a crime slant when we propounded the Holmes-Watson theory.

H. H. Holmes, of course, is actually Anthony Boucher, whose multifarious activities (reviewing mysteries for the San Francisco *Chronicle,* writing the Sherlock Holmes broadcasts for years and handling the crime-fiction review for ELLERY QUEEN MYSTERY MAGAZINE, to name but a few) in allied fields have lamentably cut down upon his own fiction-writing proclivities. We wish he'd do something for us in the stfantasy field as he can wield a very mean macabre.

Drop us another line soon—please there, Curtis.

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WELL, TRIM OUR EDGES AND—
by Richard R. Smith

Dear Ed: The February ish was great. All we need now is trimmed edges.

Putting first things first:

THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER: Was great, natcherly. A.E. has a good explanation for the creation of the universe. Who could create such a foolish thing as the universe except some super-science power in the future?

THE WEAKNESS OF RVOG: Good but nothing to shout about.

ASSIGNMENT ON PASIK: A good idea for a stf story.

MONSTERS FROM THE WEST: Routine. Orig Prem organizes some past civilization into selling hot-dogs, Steive unravels a "gimmick", etc. Orig Prem smells worse than the herd of skunks in his own story! Good joke, huh? Benj. Miller would be okay if he stopped grinding out Orig Prem wholesale.

THE MAN: Great, natcherly. Bradbury has a good story every time. Most people are probably prejudiced in his favor, however. Just look at the way they shouted about "The square Pegs" and moaned about "Referent". If they had known that Bradbury had written "Referent", I'll bet they would have rated it better than "Pegs". What's the use? You just can't beat psychology.

THE CARRIERS: Was no surprise.

THE HIMALAYCHALET: Had no imagination or sense of adventure. Maggie St. Clair should stick to washing dishes and tucking the kiddies in bed at night. (Cruel ain't I?)

MESSENGER: Sounded like a detective story.

FROM PEAS TO HORSES TO MEN wasn't as good as the first installment but good nevertheless.

TRS was good as per usual.

Long live our beloved and untrimmed edges!—*6 East 44th Street, Wilmington, Del.*

It looks as though they'll live a while longer at that, Richard. You and your skunk jokes—pfui!

NEW WRITE, LONG READ
by Richard G. Elliott

Dear Editor: As a first time writer, but long time reader of your unusual magazine I'll take the usual tack of reviewing the curent issue and then add a few remarks which I believe are unusually pertinent.

The Weapon Shops of Isher—Not up to the other Weapon Shop stories, but a very fine story indeed by the best writer of stf in the business. Please, more stories that make us think.

The Weakness of Rvog—Interesting, well-written, thoughtfully conceived.

Monsters from the West—Good idea gone completely to pot. Humor is forced and imagination is completely lacking. All the Orig Prem stories have been first-rate flops, but this is by far the worst. Drop this series, Please!

Assignment on Pasik—Barely readable.

The Man—For some time now I have been ripping Bradbury's stories from magazines and binding them permanently for my collection. This piece of sentimental slop, however, I'm going to ignore. Bradbury couldn't have written anything this bad. Please say it isn't so.

The Carriers—Not bad. Relatively interesting.

The Himalaychalet—See comment on "Monsters from the West".

Messenger—Good. Sturgeon couldn't write a poor story if he tried.

The Reader Speaks—Why not have Chad Oliver write this entire section. His letters are so much more thoughtful and mature than the general run it's truly a pleasure to read them. Please get rid of the screwballs and the know-it-alls such as Rick Sneary and Marion Zimmer. Miss Zimmer says she looks like a Bergey girl. Bergey girls don't look like human beings. To judge from some of Miss Zimmer's letters she isn't—Hmmmmm. Could be?

[*Turn page*]

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To get into the Kuttner-Merritt controversy Kuttner has under the name Lewis Padgett writen some magnificent stf. Merritt is the most boring dull, long-winded author in the business. Wonder why Kuttner has to use a pen name in order to write a good story?

By the way, I'm quite sure that Lawrence O'Donnell is not Henry Kuttner, but is instead C. L. Moore, who is Mrs. Henry Kuttner and an excellent author in her *own right*.

I'd like more by van Vogt, Hubbard and Sturgeon. One story by Heinlein would more than make up for all the nasty things 've said.—*YMCA, Erie, Pennsylvania.*

We'd like another Heinlein story ourselves but, alas, he seems to have graduated to more lucrative writing fields more or less permanently. And Hubbard has lately been concentrating on westerns. We have van Vogt in our next issue, as previously announced, and Sturgeon is somewhere in the throes of preparing a long job either for TWS or SS.

We don't think you're fair to Kuttner after a look at the record. As for Sneary and Zimmer, through no fault of ours or yours they are missing this time out. We hope it is only a temporary lapse.

For the rest—why don't you buy a new breakfast food or something? Or turn your bed around? Or—oh, well, let it go.

IT'S BACK!

by Michael Wigodsky

Dear Sir: Notice second new address. Note it, please. Having re-moved, I do not wish to be removed. From the sucker-lists, I mean. I get some of the *interesting-est* reading-matter that way. (Forgive any typographical errors, please. Am listening to second Metropolitan matinee broadcast, Tristan und Isolde, with Melchior and Traubel. Todgeweihtes haupt, todgeweihtes Herz!)

I said at beginning of Feb49 letter that I would be short, and took two-thirds of a column. This time, I'll take just as much, but I won't call it short. I call it long, which is no relation to Frank Beltbuckle.

Before doing any rating, I'd like to comment on a certain inconsistency in the novel which I noticed. This is not in the story itself, which is perfectly self-membered, but in the time relationship to the other stories. We are told that this takes place about two months later than the first story. Unfortunately, the second story took place *seven years* after the first story, and it is in this tale that Fara Clark's son Cayle left Glay.

Another inconsistency is this: The name of Walter deLany was that under which Hedrock had founded the Weapon Shops, therefore, Innelda would surely recognize it. Otherwise, a fine story. First place for the issue: THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER, a novel by A. E. van Vogt.

Blish and Knight contributed a great deal to the issue. Though the nature of the RVOG wasn't too great a surprise, the exposition of the death-wish psychology certainly was, though van Vogt used almost this same twist in THE RULL, published in another magazine in 1948. Second place for the issue: THE WEAKNESS OF RVOG, by James Blish and Damon Knight, a novelet.

Bradbury contributed a tale, which, despite the *mysticism* of the ending, took a well deserved third place, which might have been first in many an issue of a few years back. Third place for the issue: THE MAN, a short story by Ray Bradbury.

Miss (?) St. Clair presents her seventh Oona and Jick story. So far, there have been THE SOMA RACKS, (6); SUPER WHOST, (10); ALEPH SUB ONE, (5); THE DOBRIDUST, (1); THE METAL LARK, (5); THE ROTOHOUSE, (2); and this, THE HIMALAYACHALET, (8). With ten as the best. As can be seen, Miss (?) St. Clair is climbing, or rather jumping, out of a slump. Fourth place for the issue: THE HIMALAYACHALET, a short story by Margaret St. Clair.

FitzGerald, the BudGregoryist, improves, as is seen. Fifth place for the issue: ASSIGNMENT ON PASIK, a novelet by William FitzGerald.

Miller of the strange spelling (Benj, I mean) presents a strange smelling skun—oops, I mean story. Sixth place in the issue: MONSTERS FROM THE WEST, Orig Prem, a novelet by Benj Miller.

Seventh place for the issue: MESSENGER, a short story by Theodore Sturgeon.

Eighth place for the issue: THE CARRIERS, a short story by Sam Merwin Jr.

The article would have gone above RVOG, if I had included it.

Two notes more, or perhaps three.

1. I have re-read "I LIKE YOU TOO . . .", and have decided it should go between MIRACLE TOWN and COSMIC JACKPOT, or higher, or even in first place.

2. I have read DEVILS FROM DARKONIA, and *did not care for it. I have not read the other stories* you mention, but have heard well of them.

3. The ten best stories of 1948, in both SS and TWS:

1. FRUITS OF THE AGATHON, by Charles Harness.
2. AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT, by Arthur C. Clarke.
3. AND THE MOON BE STILL AS BRIGHT, by Ray Bradbury.
4. THE EARTH MEN, by Ray Bradbury.
5. THE VISITOR, by Ray Bradbury.
6. I LIKE YOU TOO, by Joe Gibson.
7. HUMPTY DUMPTY HAD A GREAT FALL, by Frank Belknap Long.
8. HAPPY ENDING, by Henry Kuttner.
9. WHAT MAD UNIVERSE?, by Fredric Brown.
10. THE UNSPEAKABLE McINCH, by Jack Vance.

In the name of Hans Sachs, Goodby.—Apartment 2F, 2203 Kipling, Houston, Texas.

Who is Hans Sachs that you take his name, Mike? And so you didn't like DEVILS FROM DARKONIA. Oh, well, sometimes we wonder what's the use.

MILD(?) LECTURE

by Mrs. Eva Firestone

Good Day, Sir: There have been several remarks of yours, slightly irksome to an oldtimer (me), therefore, it seems a mild lecture, kindly meant, is in order, thus—Fandom was organized with the basic idea of obtaining more Science-Fantasy; to unite in one great request of publishers for favorite fiction. And this continues to be the primary motive.

With confidence the statement may be made that eighty percent of the members are constantly converting new readers. And there are numerous, too many to mention, other campaigns for which promags could be thankful. Secondary is our natural human desire for contact, and the rapidly growing exchange of letters is world-wide.

This correspondence was originated by Stf. Clubs. Nothing else could create such friendly feelings. It is one of the finest things that ever happened. Furthermore, "feuding among Stfers" is neither a general condition, nor chronic, but rather, in cases of a sporadic nature, infecting so few members that the majority never even hear of it. End of lecture.

Another thing, IF those people who wrote that our letters printed in TWS and SS are adolescent, moronic, senile etc., *would show us a sample*, we might learn the technic. Just exactly what is the objection to an adolescent letter, anyway? TEV and TRS would become dry as dust without them. All work and no play. The critics should read Charles Fort for an indoctrination of humor and the joy of youthful phrasing.

An item in one of the Albuquerque, N. M., newspapers of recent date, states that the famous Canyon Diablo meteorite crater near Winslow, Arizona is

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rectangular in shape, not circular. That aerial photographs taken from an altitude of 13,000 feet show that the sides of the crater are almost parallel. Is this a late discovery? The upthrown dirt wall is a ring form.

Thanks very much to the writers in Jan. SS for information that other Star-suns have planet satellites. I have always believed this to be true, but never before heard anyone express with authority that it is a fact. By universe, I meant all space, not just our little solar system. There *is* a book, by Thirring, all about Einstein's Theory, and it *does* say that space is a sphere.—*Upton, Wyoming.*

In which case it wasn't space that made that crater—unless it developed corners. Seriously, Madame (and good day to you too), we have no intention of taking stfandom to task for anything—only a few of the more lunatic fringeurs and fringeuses. We're thankful, properly thankful indeed.

STATE OF CONFUSION
by Ed Cox

Dear Editor: Well, Ed Corley needn't worry about about *this* letter being over two double-spaced pages! Short and not too sweet it will be.

Snooty looking dame on the cover. That's all I can say for it though.

Alfred E. van Vogt's story was by far the best thing to happen to TWS for a long time. It starts off 1949 excellently. I hope vV has many more. Ties in with the previous Weapon Shop stories all right although I thought the series had ended.

The three novelets were all up to snuff. Blish & Knight's story very good. Miller's is up to par. Nice series he has here. As good as Vance's. William Fitzgerald Jenkins' story was typically done and enjoyably so.

This is the first Bradbury story I didn't quite get. THE MAN had me a bit puzzled. Merwin's story was good. Better than any he's done yet. But did the humans kill the other races? Or the drive?? St. Clair's story was punk. Sturgeon's good.

I knew Bradbury wrote REFERENT but I thought "Sterling" was his pen-name, not a house name! Who wrote the last four Captain Future stories (not counting Wellman's)? Also, I'll bet it was Hamilton who wrote NEVER THE TWAIN SHALL MEET a couple of years ago in TWS! (Fans have memories like elephants.)

But I'm shocked! You printed that little note of Bradbury's in which he commented on REFERENT. And he used a *swear*-word! What will this do to our young innocent fanhood!? The idol of millions using a word like that! And you print it. This is a hell of a thing.

You aren't the first to realize that science-fiction may become as popular as the detective story (we know it—Editor.) But I doubt if it will *replace* the detective story. But it is heartening to see how the science fiction magazines are getting the go ahead signal.

For instance: there are plenty of sports magazines, etc., on the market but they are still about the same as usual. But TWS and SS are being enlarged and expanded while the love, sports, etc. mags are remaining pretty much the same as they've always been.

THE FRYING PAN remains unfunny. Why not follow the suggestions about making the TWS fanzine review the same as the one in SS? But trying to convince an editor to do something is like chipping away at the Rock of Gibraltar with a pick-ax. . . .

Next ish sounds good, specially since Noel Loomis has top-billing. However, Editor friend (or friend Editor, I mean), you almost gave away something you're keeping secret. You should've changed a certain name . . . I won't go into detail cause I'm not supposed to but . . . heheheheh! *You* probably don't even get it! But this ain't empty gibbering either.—*4 Spring Street, Lubec, Maine.*

You're right on NEVER THE TWAIN

[*Turn page*]

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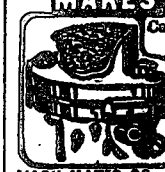

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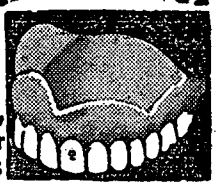

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SHALL MEET. That was a E. Hamilton opus. As for the final Brett Sterling CAPTAIN FUTURE jobs—after Hamilton got tabbed by our Uncle for war service, William Morrison (Joe Samachsen) took over until he too got his summons. Manly Wade Wellman finished up.

We never suggested that the science fiction story should replace the mystery-detective story as such. We do think it may take over much of the latter's reader popularity, however—*if* someone can come up with that all-important magnetic character or some parallel setup. Incidentally, we *don't* get the gigglish point of your final paragraph. Please elucidate.

SPEAKING OF HAMILTONS

by James E. Hamilton, Jr.

Dear Editor: The February TWS arrived today, and naturally I took time to read everything except the advertisements. And, having read, I would like to remark upon the stories.

First, however, I wish to thank you for clearing up some confusion regarding the Brett Sterling by-line. I had heard that this was one of Edmond Hamilton's nom-de-plumes, yet some time ago (I believe it was in the January, 1947, SS) you said that Sterling took over the authorship of the CF series after Hamilton was drafted and I was wondering how an author's nom-de-plume could write his stories for him. Now I know.

Now for the stories. I have learned the folly of saying that such-and-such a story is either a flop or a classic, so I am not going so far as to say that the story is good or bad, because there are dissenters from every viewpoint. If one were to say that Jesus of Nazareth greatly influenced religious history, or that Ivan the Terrible was cruel, there would be at least one person who would dissent.

WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER, by van Vogt. There are those who extol the virtues of van Vogt's writing, but if this is a fair sample of same those plaudits affect me not at all. I don't like it. The ending was a superb piece of writing, but it didn't fit the story at all. McAllister could have died a trillion years before his birth just as easily without involving a lot of petty political pirates.

THE WEAKNESS OF RVOG, by Blish and Knight. This thing reads like the old gag of killing a man by convincing him he's dead. I didn't like so well.

MONSTERS FROM THE WEST, by Miller. The longer this nonsense continues the better I'll be pleased.

ASSIGNMENT ON PASIK, by Fitzgerald. Thanks for betraying the fact that Fitzgerald is Leinster. I'll explain that remark a few paragraphs farther along. The story was better than some, not so good as others.

THE MAN, by Bradbury. Hmm. Kuttner, look to thy laurels. I can remember when I couldn't figure out why everyone raved about Bradbury. I thought he was a terrible writer. But not any more.

THE CARRIERS, by Merwin. I liked this, even if I did figure out the solution fairly early in the story. It's about time someone wrote a story with a female character that did something more than get rescued from terrible dangers without being cast in the role of a villian.

THE HIMALAYACHALET, by St. Clair. Not too bad.

MESSENGER, by Sturgeon. Sturgeon is *not* one of my favorite authors. Enough said.

To get back to Leinster-Fitzgerald, in the October issue, in response to a letter in The Reader Speaks, you listed a number of stories slated for early publication, among them ASSIGNMENT ON PASIK, and you stated that it was written by Murray Leinster. In the same listing you gave a story called SEA KINGS OF MARS, by Leigh Brackett, as the lead novel for April. Yet in this issue, in the section entitled 'Our

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Next Issue', you list Loomis' THE ULTIMATE PLANET as the April lead story. No mention of SEA KINGS. What gives?

Note: The above is not a complaint, merely a query.—*Hartwick, New York.*

Well, Frere Cox, need elucidate no more. We understand perfectly. Memories like elephants is right—or perhaps whales. As for the switch in schedule, it was just that, as the SEA KINGS in this issue should prove.

HALP, SOMEBODY!
by Jack O'Boyle

Dear Editor: I've been reading your mags TWS and SS for about five years now and this is the first time I've written in to you. I'm just doing so now to acquaint Mr. Sturgeon with a little physics. He says "Hold 20 candles 20 feet from a light meter and it will indicate 1 ft. candle."

Ft. candles equal candlepower divided by the distance squared. (Ft. candles $= \frac{C.P.}{d^2}$) One candle 1 foot away $= \frac{20}{20^2}$ or $\frac{1}{20}$ of a foot candle. I think your mags are tops in their field. Keep Bergey on the cover and get van Vogt more often and you'll keep me happy.—*1114 Longfellow Ave., Royal Oak, Mich.*

Mr. O'Boyle—you sound like one of those Optic Christians supposedly confined to Ethiopia and points adjacent thereto. We remember having a frightful sweat over a lot of candles in freshman physics too many years ago. The blasted things kept going out.

STABBED
by Dirk Schaeffer

Dear Ed: Score yourself at least 6 stars for the February ish of TWS. And give the credit to Wonder-Boy Bradbury. Man, what a story! I haven't any adjectives to describe it, but supercollosalextrasplendidmagnifique comes as close as I can get. The only thing Ray has done that even approaches to "The Man" is "And the Moon Be Still as Bright", but even that lacked something in that it was sort of a steal from Ed Hamilton's "Conquest of Two Worlds". I just can't get over it, can't forget it; the story haunts me day and night. But I'll try to escape its influence long enough to comment on the rest of the mag.

Next best, but nowhere nearly as good as The Man, was Blish and Knight's "Weakness of RVOG". One piece of criticism, though. According to the story RVOG's "name" was: red, green, orange, violet. To my way of spelling that reads RGOV. Or is there some hidden meaning to RVOG that I'm not aware of.

The Weapon Shops rate third place—pretty good as stories go—it gives some sort of explanation as to how is time-travel possible, which is a darn sight better than a whole mess of stories I've read.

The rest I'm indifferent to, except "The Carriers", which stank, and "The Himalaychalet", which like all of St. Clair's (except that short with the Latin name that she did about a half-year or so ago), also stank. Why, why, why, don't you kill Jick and Oona off, once and for all?

Illos—Virg Finlay, I'm beginning to think, is a has-been. What happened? He's never done this badly before. Who does the pics for F. Orin? And talking about that Tremaine boy, his name sounds familiar, what did he do before he started this series? About his articles, Ed, I'll let you in on a confidential piece

[*Turn page*]

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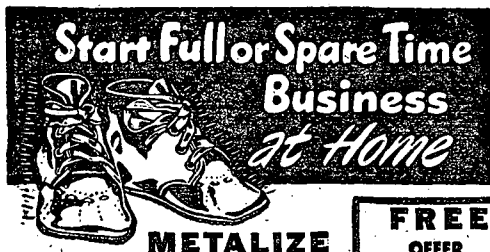

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of information—they just plain ain't no good. I think—I haven't studied them intensely enough to be sure—I think his fault lies in the fact that he tries to make his material too easy to understand.—*803 West Center Street, Alma, Michigan.*

Don't blame Finlay—blame the printing job, which was messy in the February issue. Same for the F. Orlin Tremaine illustration. As for the RVOG-vs-RGOV messup—blame us. We teed off on a typographical error in editing the story, liked RVOG better than RGOV and kept it that way throughout. We never did think to check the colors.

NO CALLIDETIC GIANT HE

by John Van Couvering

Greetings, Gumshoe: Tell me, chum, does one have to be a callidetic giant like Cayle Clark to influence the warped policies of an equally warped editorial personality enough to get one's letter printed? I'm sure there must be more to it than double-spacing . . . A little of the greasy green, hah? Well, I'm a man of high principles but low finances . . . if you print this, I'll know it was me poisonality what done it.

Being only an average fan with perhaps a supercraving for that devilish corto-thalamical benzedrine better known as ego-boo, it is but of the most natural that I should now digress and attempt to pit my frustration-riddled cancer of a mind against the products of your brain-boys. Enough of this resounding dedudancy—on to the fray!

Let it hereby be proclaimed from every roof-top and tent-pole: VAN COUVERING APPROVES OF WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER! Surprised? You know darned well you aren't, you sly fox, you! With fiendish cunning you analyzed my weakness . . . the only chink in my intellectual armor . . . van Vogt! And then . . . oh, so very sneakily . . . you slipped WSOI into your ragged pulp, knowing full well you destroyed with one blow one of the most carefully-built-up cynicisms of all time! Yes . . . it's true . . . gloat, and to the nethermost outposts of Stygia with you, you——Laugh! Sneer! Howl with devilish glee! You have degraded me . . . I am one with the slimiest sewage. . . .

One more thing before I slither into the dark, though. Your use of Virgil Finlay on inside pics has become more and more noticeable, as F's artistic style has become (if possible) better every issue. In this issue, as you well know, you have some . . . if not all . . . of the finest artwork in the entire field of sf. Bergey's irritant power affects me not . . . I merely soak my soul in Finlay, and the oblivion of absolute ecstasy claims me. . . .

Corny? You said it! By the way, if you haven't been told already, your yarn THE CARRIERS needs a sequel badly. Was it the stellar drive that killed off everyone? Or if not, what?—*10358 South Downey Avenue, Downey, California.*

We're beginning to wonder ourselves. Remind us to ask Merwin about it. Though what difference it makes we can't for the life of us figure.

And as for bribery to get into the letter column, don't be giving us ideas what with taxes the erosive things they are.

Which brings us to the final out of today's game. We'll be back next month in STARTLING STORIES with THE ETHER VIBRATES and allied features, to say nothing of fascinating fiction. See you then, and back here in August. —THE EDITOR.

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SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW

DARKER THAN YOU THINK by Jack Williamson, Fantasy Press, Reading, Pennsylvania ($3.00).

GOOD vampire stories are rare—and so, perhaps as a correlary, are good tales of lycanthropy or were-wolfism. When you have read Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris* you have purportedly read about all the half-decent fiction, outside of legend and fairy tales, that have been written upon the more-or-less allied topics.

Undeterred by the fact that some thousands of reasonably competent authors have tackled both subjects to fall flat upon their

collective puss, Jack Williamson has combined them in *Darker than You Think* and has even had the temerity to inject via a sort of Garden-of-Eden detour an element of scientifictional logic into them.

More important, he has succeeded in writing a whale of an exciting book.

He achieves an element of the bizarre in his very first chapter, which sees a disgruntled ex-scientist-turned-reporter, Will Barbee, covering the arrival by plane of his former friends and colleagues in Dr. Mondrick's expedition from the Gobi desert, where they have reputedly made sensational discoveries as to the origin of Man.

He meets the gorgeous red-headed cub reporter, April Bell, of a rival paper, sees Dr. Mondrick almost literally drop dead and acquires suspicions as to his manner of death when he finds the stabbed kitten in April's discarded handbag. He does not, however, learn the secret findings of the expedition, which remained concealed from him in the silver-lined chest.

[*Turn page*]

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WITHOUT SORCERY by Theodore Sturgeon, Prime Press ($3.00).

WE LIKED everything in this collection of thirteen stories, ranging from shorts to short novels, save for, of all things, Ray Bradbury's Introduction, which seemed to put more stress upon Mr. Sturgeon's night-glowing viscera than upon the stories he presents.

Trying to pick a winner from the group, above all the winners here presented, is a job for a more expert handicapper than ourselves. They all have the Sturgeon wit and bite and meticulously easy style. Of them all, and this is entirely a matter of personal preference, we lean more strongly toward *Maturity, Brat, Ether Breather* and *Shottle Bop.*

But everyone who reads the book—and we hope a great many people do—will have his own favorites. It is one of the strongest and most varied anthologies, especially for a one-man job, that we have read in or out of stf.

SPURIOUS SUN by George Borodin, Werner Laurie, London (8s 6d).

MR. BORODIN, listed by his publisher as one of England's "most famous plastic surgeons," is apparently a man of many parts. Outside of his profession he has written of biography, history, travel, music and ballet, apparently with considerable success.

Unfortunately *Spurious Sun* is not one of his happier efforts. A cosmic allegory of tremendous scale, it deals with a world catastrophe resulting from the detonation of an atomic pile in Scotland which threatens, through chain reaction in the ionosphere, for a time to turn good old terra into a bit of charred bacon.

Humanity, with much stress on the Iron

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Curtain, heavy-handed satire on Communist dialectics and racial inequality in the USA, goes through its familiar paces of morality mass lapses, war hysteria and brotherhood enforced by an obnoxious sort of children's crusade and, after a brief period of backsliding once the threat is finally lifted, finds itself a jolly old place to live in after all.

To our way of thinking Dr. Borodin's satiric gift needs far more insight to carry such a tale—more insight, penetration and subtlety, to say nothing of originality. Furthermore, the tale lacks any such personal focus as did the recent and memorable *Greener than You Think*, and as such has a tendency to spread itself around in crop-dusting fashion.

We wish we could treat it more kindly since fantasy publication overseas has been thin to the point of emaciation since 1939 and needs every lift it can get. But we fear this particular book is not the tonic that will put it on its feet. We could be oh so wrong—and we hope we are.

—THE EDITOR.

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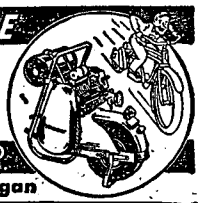

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The FRYING PAN

A REVIEW OF FANZINES

ONE of the outstanding mysteries of science fiction to the lay or casual reader is the so-called science fiction "fan." His interest in stf is all-absorbing and he largely absorbs the letter columns of this magazine and its partner, STARTLING STORIES.

He has developed a strange lingo, he spends endless time and what money he can scrape together on amateur fantasy publications which run to several hundred a year. He forms clubs for discussion of his favorite topic, of which many belong to loose-leafed national organizations such as NFFA (National Fantasy Fan Association), FAPA (Fantasy Amateur Press Association) or SAPS (Spectator Amateur Press Association).

He is, in short, a fanatic in the true sense of the word where science fiction is concerned. Perhaps the best description of a stfan was written and delivered in the form of a speech at last summer's So-called World Fan Convention in Toronto—the Torcon.. by Robert Bloch, one of the better-known professional authors of science fiction.

The Seven Ages of Fan

It is entitled THE SEVEN AGES OF FAN and we are taking the liberty of reprinting it here. Says Mr. Bloch—

One of the occupational hazards of fantasy writing (along with ulcers, fights with the loan companies and schizophrenia) is a constant exposure to fandom.

For years I have kept silent on the subject (far be it from me to bite the hand that feeds me, however poorly) but there comes a time when truth cries out for utterance. Only last night the time

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came to me. I was sitting at the fire, nodding away as is my wont when listening to my wife, when a strange veiled figure entered the room.

"Utterance!" it yelled. "Utterance!"

"Who, pray," I inquired politely, "the hell are you?"

"I am Truth," replied the veiled figure, "and I am crying out for Utterance, who couldn't make it tonight and besides which he has a sore throat."

"That is very interesting," I mused, ripping the veil aside and discovering the figure of my small daughter, aged 5. "And now if you will kindly scram out of here I will get down to my business, which is to write an article about the Seven Ages of Fan."

It was and is my purpose to discuss the strange metamorphosis which seems to take place in the character, personality, aims and attitude of the Average Fan as I have observed him.

This survey has absolutely nothing in common with Shakespeare's "Seven Ages of Man" except, perhaps, that Shakespeare and myself are both writers. End of digressions. To work, to wit—

The First Age of Fan

—is the Quiescent or reader-interest age. During this brief period our embryonic fans buys several fantasy magazines, weird or s-f, and proceeds to actually read them from cover to cover. I know that some of the more blase and sophisticated fans are going to dispute this fact but I can vouch for it—I have actually seen it with my own eyes. In the first stage, I maintain, fans really read the magazines.

The Second Age of Fan

—follows all too quickly, alas, upon the heels of the initial period. This is the Chirospastic stage, characterized by writer's cramp, during which the neophyte fan begins to write letters to the pro magazines, commenting on the stories and urging that the editor throw out everything except Kuttner yarns.

The Third Age of Fan

—finds the now enthralled victim sending personal letters c/o the editors to his favorite authors (outside of Kuttner, most fans seem to like Lewis Padgett, Keith Hammond, Lawrence O'Donnell, Will Garth, Hudson Hastings, Paul Edmonds and such people). These letters consist of requests for autographs, favorable comments on published writings and a solicitation that the author read the fan's writings and revise them or collaborate with him on stories.

The Fourth Age of Fan

—represents a crucial phase in his development. It is characterized by a chance exposure to a fan magazine, followed quickly by high fever, delirium and spots before the eyes—the latter caused by the faulty mimeographing of the magazine. Usually, without pause or rallying, the patient goes directly into—

The Fifth Age of Fan

—which consists of publishing his own fan-magazines and ruthlessly spreading it over the

[*Turn page*]

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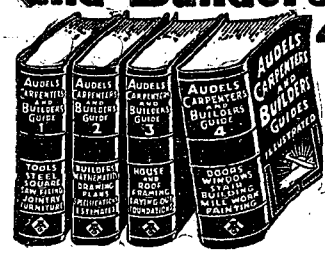

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entire fan world. By this time, of course, what with writings to editors and reading fan-mags and writing to authors and writing fan-mags, the fan has absolutely no time left to read any more pro magazines. And he wouldn't care for the stuff if he did read it.

For he is now a full-fledged fan in mid-career and by this time he is entering the sixth stage, which is almost inevitably fatal.

The Sixth Age of Fan

—is characterized by "Joining-fever," sometimes known as sympathetic herd-delusion or mass-hysteria. In this stage the fan rushes in and meets other sufferers. He often organizes and not infrequently goes so far as to convene. Sometimes he even draws up and charters. Fans visit him. He visits fans. Before he knows it he has entered into personal or literary contact with dozens of others and has at least eight bitter feuds going at the same time.

Once this stage is reached there is no turning back. The rest is inevitable.

There remains only—

The Seventh Age of Fan

—Tottering on the brink of the abyss, the fan presents a truly pitiable picture—a haggard caricature of what was once a happy 12-year-old boy. He cannot read the pro magazines any more because he and his fellow fans know that they stink. He cannot write to the editors any more because they are his bitter enemies. He is all washed up with the pro authors who refused to collaborate with him on his epics.

He no longer finds time to read even the fan-mags. Of course he gets very few of these because his feuds have cut him off the mailing lists. As for his own fan-mag, he doesn't bother to put it out—there is no one left to mail it to after he rules out all of those who disagree with him. And he has alienated his personal contacts due to long, bitter arguments over Shaver, the World of Null-A or Ghu-Ghu.

No, there is no way to retrace his steps. He can only take the plunge, over the edge of the precipice. He has reached the SEVENTH STAGE. Hating fantasy fiction, fantasy readers, fantasy editors, fantasy authors and fantasy fans, there is nothing left for him to do but become a fantasy publisher.

Which he does!

What more is there to say? The moral is all too obvious. If there are those among you who are in any of the preliminary phases, do not delude yourself.

Repent now, before it is too late. Turn back, I beseech you! Become an agent, become a pro author, become anything, however low and vile—but do it now, while there is yet time and hope.

But. . . . if, in spite of all my pleas, warnings and entreaties. . . . you succumb and reach that fatal final SEVENTH STAGE. . . .

Then get in touch with me. I've got a lot of crud lying around, suitable for publication in book form. The line forms at your left.

Does anyone wish to know more about the genus fan? We think not. *Adios.*

—THE EDITOR.

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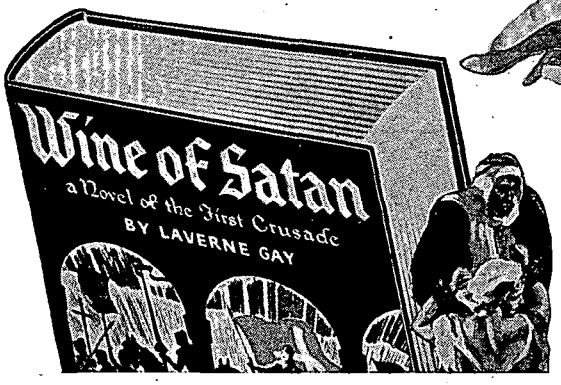

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